

MAGIC & MAYHEM IN CELTIC HISTORY AND LITERATURE

by Graeme Davis



'The whole race... is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle'
Strabo (c. 63 BC - AD 21)

This observation, made when the Roman Empire was assimilating the newly-conquered Celts of Gaul, holds true throughout Celtic history, from the Roman conquests of Gaul and Britain and the Dark-Age 'Celtic Revival' which spawned the earliest Arthurian legends to the Norman and Tudor campaigns in Ireland. Celtic society centred around a warrior aristocracy in the same way as that of the 'heroic age' Greece of Homer, and a great deal of surviving Celtic literature and tradition concerns itself with warfare and heroic deeds.

The weapons of the 'classic' Celtic warrior were sword, shield and spear; 'their spears have points as long as swords,' wrote the Roman Diodorus Siculus of the Gauls. Archaeological finds of swords from this period in Europe show an average length in the region of three feet from pommel to point, in marked contrast to the short stabbing sword of the Roman legionary. Scabbards had decorative bronze fittings, often faced with bronze, and decorated with the circular and spiral patterns characteristic of Celtic art.

Two kinds of spear were used: a light javelin or throwing-spear, of which the warrior usually had more than one, and a heavier fighting spear (Irish *craisech*) used in closer combat. Diodorus Siculus

records that the heads of some spears are forged 'with breaks throughout their entire length, so that the blow not only cuts but also tears the flesh, and the recovery of the spear tears open the wound'; Cu Chulainn's spear Gae Bolga is said to have many barbs.

Shields were made of wood or leather, rectangular or oval in shape, and large enough to protect the whole body. The boss was bronze, with relief decoration, and sometimes other decorative fittings. The most luxurious shields had facings of sheet-bronze, like that found in the Thames at Battersea and now in the British Museum. This shield is about half normal size, and apparently was never intended for use in battle; it is thought to have been produced to be deliberately offered to the god of the river. The Irish epic *Tain Bo Cuailgne* (the Cattle-Raid of Cooley) mentions shields with sharpened rims, and says that 'when Cu Chulainn did the feat of the shield-rim he could shear with his shield as sharply as a spear or sword,' but there is no mention of this tactic outside these sagas, and this may be one of many exaggerations which have crept into the story between the events it records (thought on archaeological grounds to be in the 1st or 2nd century AD) and the time that it was first written down in about the 7th century.

Apart from the shield, most warriors wore a helmet of some kind. Diodorus Siculus mentions 'large bronze helmets with large projecting figures lending the appearance of enormous stature to the wearer; in some cases horns.... in other cases.... the foreparts of birds or animals',

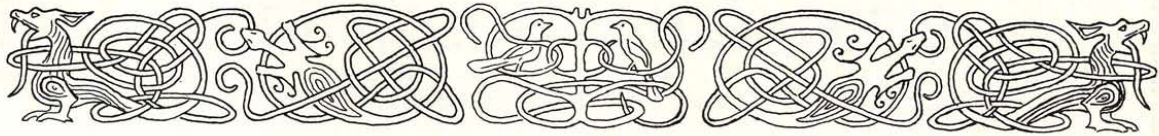
and Cu Chulainn's equipment in the *Tain Bo Cuilaigne* included a crested battle-helmet. The helmet covered the head only; nasals and eye guards are a Scandinavian development. It is worth mentioning, while on the subject of the Vikings, that they never wore the horned and decorated helmets for which they have later become famous; these were a purely Celtic item.

Use of body armour varied. Diodorus Siculus mentions that some Gauls used a chainmail shirt or hauberk, while others entered battle completely naked. It is thought that going naked into battle invoked some ritual or magical protection, although this extravagant scorning of danger seems in keeping with Celtic bravado. Cu Chulainn's armour in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne* consisted of 'twenty seven tunics of waxed skin, plated and pressed together.... over them he put on his heroic deep battle-belt of stiff, tough, tanned leather from the choicest parts of the hides of seven yearlings, covering him from his narrow waist to the thickness of his armpit'; clearly some kind of leather armour, although the number of tunics must be an exaggeration.

A distinctive feature of warfare among some communities was chariot-fighting. Caesar first encountered chariots in Britain; although Diodorus Siculus mentions them in Gaul, his information probably comes from the lost account of Posidonius, a Greek who travelled in Gaul some two hundred years earlier. They seem to have been dying out in Britain when Caesar encountered them, for no mention appears in accounts of the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43. Chariots figure prominently in the Irish sagas, and we are allowed a glimpse of some of the etiquette surrounding them. The Celtic chariot was drawn by a pair of horses, and was open at the front and back with a pair of semicircular wicker sides. It carried the noble warrior and his charioteer, and Caesar describes British chariot-fighting as follows:

'In chariot-fighting the Britons begin by diving all over the field hurling javelins.... then.... they jump down from the chariots and engage on foot. In the meantime, their charioteers retire a short distance from the battle and place the chariots in such a position that their masters, if hard pressed by numbers, have an easy means of retreat to their own lines. Thus, they combine the mobility of cavalry with the staying power of infantry.'

From the Irish sagas, it is clear that the chariot and charioteer were as much the mark of the true hero as the charger and squire to later chivalry. The charioteer was comparable in status and function to the knight's squire, and was normally



regarded as noncombatant except in outright war; it was far more prestigious to send him home with his master's body and the story of how a mighty warrior overcame him. In the Irish sagas, if a chariot drew up with its left (ie shield) side facing an encountered warrior, this was an insult to be washed out in blood.

There is no archaeological evidence for the use of scythe-blades attached to chariot-wheels, which would have caused as much damage to friend as to foe; although Cu Chulainn is said to use a 'sickle-chariot' in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, this may be an invention or exaggeration.

The use of chariots was restricted to the nobility. Those who could afford them, typically freehold farmers, would have ridden horses, while the peasantry fought on foot. Swords, because of their cost, would have been restricted to the upper echelons of society, as would shields and helmets to a lesser extent, but even the meanest peasant would have had a spear of some kind.

Other weapons included slings and, to a lesser extent, bows. These would have been used mainly for hunting and fowling, and not in battle. The nobility preferred fighting at close quarters. Cu Chulainn, the archetypal Irish hero, was highly skilled in the use of the sling, but never used it in battle. It seems mainly to have been a weapon for peasants and boys, to hunt rabbits and wildfowl, but the discovery of piles of slingstones at the Iron Age hillfort of Maiden Castle attests to its use in war, again probably by peasants and youths.

Daggers were also common, but were seldom used except in brawls. The axe does not appear to have been utilised until fairly late; no mention of it is found in the classical writers or the Irish sagas, but it is found occasionally in the Welsh myths of the *Mabinogion*, which mostly reflect events in the Dark Ages. The axe was used as a weapon by the Saxons whom Arthur fought after the Romans left Britain, and may not have been introduced to the repertoire of the Celtic warrior until then. The Norman writer Gerald de Barri (Gerald of Wales, c1146-1223) says that the Irish 'always carry an axe in their hand as if it were a staff', but by the time he was writing, Ireland had been influenced by Viking settlers. Thus the axe does not seem to have been a native Celtic weapon. Later, the *galloglach* (the 'gallowglass' mentioned by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*) played an important role in 14-16th century Ireland. The name means 'foreign warriors', and they were mercenaries recruited from the Gallo-Scandinavian inhabitants of the Western Isles of Scotland. Their distinctive weapon was the *gallowglass*, a heavy,

long-handled battleaxe or short poleaxe.

Other weapons were not common. Clubs were used by less civilised churls and a few of the ogre/giant types encountered in Celtic literature, and in one case iron flails are mentioned, but these are most exceptional.

In addition to his sword, spears and shield, Cu Chulainn is said to have used eight small darts; he and his foster-brother Ferdiad duel with darts on the first day of their epic combat in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*. In the *Mabinogion*, Peredur uses a handful of darts made of holly wood. Darts are not recorded elsewhere, although the Greek geographer Strabo mentions that the Gauls used 'a wooden weapon resembling the *grosphos*, thrown by hand and not by a strap.... and which they use mostly for bird-hunting as well as for battle'. The Greek word *grosphos* translates literally as 'javelin', but he has already described the spears and javelins used by the Gauls, and his reference to a throwing-strap might suggest that he is describing some kind of dart.

There are few magical weapons in Celtic literature. The accent is always on the prowess of the hero, and the need for a magical weapon would be tantamount to an admission of weakness. The size and quality of weapons are exaggerated; spears are described as being a heavy burden for a team of oxen, for example, and swords are said to be so bright that they light an entire house, but magic is very rarely mentioned.

Fionn mac Cumhail (*Finn MacCool*) had a sword called *Mac-a-Luin* which would cut through any obstacle at a single blow, and mentioned in the stories about him are 'a spear of nine enchantments' and 'a spear of seven enchantments' whose precise qualities are not made clear. Cu Chulainn's *gae bolga* is described in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne* as follows:

'The gae bolga had to be made ready for use on a stream and cast from the fork of the toes. It entered a man's body with a single wound, like a javelin, then opened into thirty barbs. Only by cutting away the flesh could it be taken from the body.'

On several occasions when Cu Chulainn fights a foe of equal prowess, it is *gae bolga* which wins the battle. It seems only to be usable while fighting in water (in a ford, for example), and Cu Chulainn's charioteer invariably sends it to him on the water, whereupon he catches and casts it with the toes of his right foot. While it is regarded by some as a magical weapon, it might also be seen as a feat of arms using a barbed spear. It is listed among the feats and skills taught to Cu Chulainn during his training with the warrior-woman Scathack, and his opponents are often said to have all of his skills

and feats except the *gae bolga*, which was taught to no one else.

One distinctive magical weapon of the Irish stories is the *tathlum*. The *tathlum* was a weapon of great power made from a severed human head; it being the custom throughout the Celtic races to collect the heads of opponents defeated in battle. Diodorus Siculus writes with some horror 'they cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle.... and they nail up these (heads) upon their houses like.... wild animals from the hunt. They embalm in cedar oil the heads of the most distinguished enemies.... and display them with pride to strangers', and a number of Celtic ritual sites and objects in Europe feature the severed head very prominently as an object of mystic significance. The normal practice was to obtain the head of a person close to the intended victim — the closer the relationship, the greater the power of the weapon — and rather than embalming it, as would be usual, to coat it in several layers of lime until it was hard as cement. If the lime could be obtained from the territory of the intended victim, the power of the weapon was again increased. When thrown at the victim, the *tathlum* would normally kill outright, and at the very least would cause a grievous wound.

The rarity of magical items in Irish tradition is underlined by the fact that the *Tuatha De Dannan*, the semi-divine race who later became the *elflike Sidhe*, had only four, for all their sorcerous powers — the cauldron of the *Dagda*, the spear of *Lug*, the sword of *Nuada* and the stone of *Fal* (see also *IMAGINE* magazine, #5, p39).

In Welsh mythology they are slightly more common. *Bran* is given a magical cauldron (which, incidentally, originally came from Ireland, and might be connected with the cauldron of the *Dagda*) which has the property of restoring life. 'Take a man who has been slain today,' he is told, 'and throw him into it, and tomorrow he will fight as well as ever, only he will not be able to speak'. This may be a form of resurrection or even zombie animation, although necromancy of that kind is unknown in Celtic literature. *Math* has a magic wand with which he punishes his evil nephews by turning them into a variety of animals, each form lasting a year, and *Pryderi* and *Rhiannon* are imprisoned in a strange castle when they touch a golden cup chained to a marble fountain and are paralysed.

The hero *Culhwch* is set several tasks in order to win the hand of *Olwen*, daughter of the Chief Giant *Ysbaddaden*; these include obtaining a number of magical artifacts, including the *Harp of*

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smashing, where the attacker accepts a penalty to hit, but if the attack succeeds he can add his entire strength score as a damage bonus; parrying, which affords a defender extra protection (attacks are -4 to hit) against most attack forms; and disarming, an 'attack' that does no damage but forces the defender to 'check against dexterity' or drop his weapon.

Magic users

A land-owning magic user may build or seize a tower, with interesting results. A dungeon may be built beneath or near it. The dungeon is most often constructed by specialists in mining who are hired by the magic user, but it can be created magically if the proper spells are known and used. When one or more levels of the dungeon are completed and then left open, monsters will start moving in to live there. Shortly thereafter, low-level adventurers will start arriving to seek their fortunes. Most magic users with dungeons visit them once each month (or more often), gathering any magical treasures that remain. If too much treasure is taken from the creatures, they will probably move out soon after. Occasionally, if this is done quietly and secretly, the magic user may take some of the monsters for use in magical research and potion making. This must be done carefully, lest the remaining monsters be scared away.

A land-owning magic user may wish to become a Magist. This is a powerful position in any castle or stronghold. The magist advises the ruler in matters involving magic, and handles the magical needs of the ruler and the stronghold. A magist may go on normal adventures if the ruler gives permission. The ruler knows that a more experienced magist is a more powerful magist, and will usually give this permission if the magist's services are not urgently needed at present.

Spell note: The maximum damage produced by any single spell — including fire ball, lightning bolt, and delayed blast fire ball — is 20 dice, of the type specified (usually d6). This is very important for game balance, and should not be disregarded. For example, without this limit, a high-level magic user could instantly slay any other magic user by surprise, regardless of the results of the saving throw!



Thieves

A thief who wishes to settle down must contact the Thieves' Guild. The guild will help establish the thief as a guildmaster for a new branch of the guild (perhaps in a faraway town where no guild currently exists), or may send the thief to an existing guild to fill a vacancy. Income will be gained from the activities of the guild members. The character can, at some point, ask for control of a larger branch of the guild (and this is recommended when the character reaches 18th level), and may eventually become a powerful official in the guild headquarters.

Skilled (high-level) thieves are always needed for difficult and unusual adventures, and the guildmaster thief is the person contacted by adventurers when such jobs are available. The guildmaster thief may choose to take the job, or may allow one or more of the guild members to have it, but the guildmaster gets first choice in any case.

A wandering thief is known as a Rogue. A rogue must remain a member of the Thieves' Guild, though he need only visit the guild headquarters once a year. A rogue can never become guildmaster of any existing guild (though a new branch may be started with this goal in mind). However, a rogue may visit existing guildmasters and obtain local information, tips and rumours.

Demi-humans

All demi-human adventurers are very limited in levels of experience and hit points. Elves are simply incapable of learning the arts of powerful magic (spells of higher than 5th level), and no demi-human can match a human's 'staying-power' as indicated by hit points.

Though their history is long, demi-humans have never developed the art of combat to a high degree. However, humans did concentrate their talents in this area. In locales where demi-humans can learn additional fighting skills from their human friends. Thus, the player of a demi-human character should keep track of experience points earned after the character's maximum level is reached; as this figure increases, combat ability improves accordingly (as given in each class description).

Each demi-human clan has a sacred item, called a Relic, which is kept in the centre of the clan stronghold. The relic is tended by a keeper and 2-8 aides. A forge of Power rests at the heart of every dwarven clan; it may be used to create a dwarven lens and the extremely rare oil of darkness. A Tree of Life stands at the centre of every elven clan; it may be used to create an elven lightship and oil of sunlight. A Crucible of Blackflame rests at the heart of every halfling clan. Blackflame acts as the reverse of normal flame; it burns cold and dark, igniting things that normal flame does not burn, able to burn ashes and leave behind whole items. The Crucible, a pyramid-shaped wooden container, may be used (along with the Blackflame itself) to create a web of shadows and the extremely rare oil of moonlight.

The position of keeper is hereditary; each keeper passes the secret knowledge of the tending and use of the relic to his or her son or daughter, never writing down any details, lest they be stolen. This secret knowledge includes how to construct a special item, as given in each class description.

A demi-human character gains resistance to some special attack forms when the character acquires a certain number of experience points. When this resistance is gained, the demi-human automatically takes half damage from the attack given; a successful saving throw (of the type applicable) drops that to one-quarter damage.

With these rules in use, experienced demi-humans can often hold their own when adventuring with humans. Though their hit points are fewer, their special abilities, resistances, and competitive combat ability allows them to survive and compete.

Summary

The D&D Companion Set contains lots more information on the above topics. And this is only a summary of Book 1, the Players' Companion. Book 2, for Dungeon Masters, has the 'War Machine' mass combat system, new treasures, detailed campaign information, notes of the elemental planes, and (of course) new monsters — including the new undead, and dragons that can eat 15th level characters for breakfast. See next month's second preview article for more details.

✎ Frank Mentzer

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Tertiu, which plays by itself when commanded, the bottles of Gwydolwyn the Dwarf, which retain the heat of anything poured into them, and the bottles of Rhynnon Stiff Beard, in which no liquid ever soures.

In the early Arthurian stories Peredur is given a stone which renders him invisible, and in a strange castle he encounters a gwyddbwyll set (gwyddbwyll, called fiddchell in Irish, was a boardgame, apparently similar to the Norse hnefatafl) whose pieces were playing by themselves. He helps one side, which loses, and the other side raises a victory shout like an army.

Gerald of Wales mentions a number of marvels in Ireland. A lake in Connaught is said to have two islands; on one no women or female animal can set foot without dying immediately, and on the other no one ever dies, although pain and sickness are still known and most people prefer to leave for the release of death. Another lake, this time in Ulster, has an island divided into two parts. One half has a church and is frequently visited by angels and visions of local saints, while the other is barren and blasted and haunted by devils. An island in the sea off Connaught, supposedly consecrated by St Brendan, is claimed to be free of corruption; corpses are not buried there, and do not decompose. It is also supposed to be free of mice, and apparently any mouse taken there dies immediately.

Miraculous wells are also mentioned — one in Munster turns grey the hair of anyone washing in its waters, while another in Leinster will prevent hair turning grey. One in Connaught gives water which can only be drunk by humans, and poisons horses, cattle or other animals drinking it. Another in Munster causes torrential rain throughout the province if anyone touches or even looks at it, and the rain may only be stopped by a specially performed Mass.

Arthurian legends feature a number of magical items which operate in a similar way, apparently by divine judgement; the sword in the stone is one example, and the Holy Grail, of course, could only be found by the best and purest of knights. Magical items, beings and adventurers tend to figure more prominently in the later Arthurian stories, however, and cannot be said to 'Celtic' in the same way as those in the Mabinogion.

Anyone interested in the area covered by this article will find the Penguin translation of the *Mabinogion* and the Oxford Paperbacks edition of the *Tain Bo Cuailgne* (trans T Kinsella) useful; other Penguin books of interest are *A Celtic Miscellany* and *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. Barry Cunliffe's *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, which should be available through a library, has a number of excellent illustrations of weapons and other items used by pre-Roman British Celts, and Jim Fitzpatrick's illustrated version of *The Book of Conquests*, published by Paper Tiger, gives an excellent treatment, in most cases, of heroic-age Irish warriors and their equipment.

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