
An archaeology of gesture? Reconstructing some Iron Age fighting techniques

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Abstract

Armed violence (duel fighting, war...) played a fundamental role in Celtic societies of the later Iron Age. A better understanding of this practice is essential. For the archaeologist, the study of this phenomenon is based above all on archaeological material, in this case the numerous weapons found during the excavation of burials, sanctuaries, war trophies or deposits. In itself, this weaponry could be nothing more than dead material culture, and the purpose of its study would then appear to be antiquarian and obsolete. However, by exploring other approaches, it is possible to develop an archaeology of gesture and to "bring these weapons to life". This is the case, for example, with contemporary iconographic representations of these *militaria*. Produced in both indigenous and non-indigenous contexts, they do not represent martial scenes in an innocuous way: they are the object of carefully considered choices adapted to various constraints, and they carry ideological biases that need to be determined and critically observed. These images are a potential source for determining the fighting techniques. However, as in a comic strip, the single gesture represented is the non-arbitrary selection of a moment T of a complex motor sequence, which must immediately be perceptible in its entirety by the 'reader' of this image for the message to be understood. For the archaeologist, interpreting the upstream and downstream parts of this frozen moment raises the problem of parataxis: the gaps, which do not necessarily belong to our contemporary cultural fund, must be filled. The interpreter also faces another limitation: he must move from the observation of a two-dimensional material support to the conception of a three-dimensional spatial reality, whose reconstructed technical actions, in order to be intelligibly described, presuppose the development of a methodology and an ad hoc terminology.

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