

Iron Age & Celtic Antiquities - with price guide

by Vincent McCarthy



1
Celtiberian fibula circa fourth century BC, 5cm long. £30.



2
La Tene fibula circa third century BC. Found in Norfolk. £85.



3
Celtic brooch of trumpets style. Circa first century AD. Lincs. £50.



4
Boar brooch found in Scotland. First to second century AD. £135.



5
Barrel shaped dress fastener found in Yorks. 30mm. £45.



6
Decorative stud of trumpets style. Durham. Circa first century AD. £45.



7
Bronze applique bust of Atyls. Humberside. Circa first century AD. £145.

Nowadays it would be hard to imagine life without iron and steel, the most widely used metals in the world today; yet iron was discovered almost certainly by accident in the eastern Mediterranean towards the end of the second millennium BC.

The iron bearing ores were more widespread and plentiful than copper but had the disadvantage of needing high temperatures to purify and smelt the ores. At first iron was a scarce metal sometimes used to decorate bronze shields and spearheads but eventually the smelting procedures were mastered and iron began to be used alongside bronze for tools and weapons. Its use spread slowly north and west over Europe eventually reaching Britain by the seventh century BC.

As this was an agricultural society the first use of the exciting new metal was for tools such as sickles, billhooks, tongs and axes. Very few of these early Iron Age tools come onto the market today. This may be due to the low survival rate of iron in the ground, but may also indicate a slow conversion to the new metal.

At this early stage there is little evidence of iron weapons in Britain apart from the occasional import from mainland Europe. The collector will be hard pressed to find home produced swords or spearheads but may well pick up imported types. Iron sword blades with simple tang handles can be less than £200 but examples with bronze guards or handles will be at least double that price.

Horses began to be used for pulling carts or chariots so various types of harness rings and fittings in iron and bronze began to appear. These are available to collectors at modest prices. An iron ring can be found for say £30 but you will have to pay rather more for bronze pieces which are usually more decorative and better preserved.

There was also the beginnings of a home grown pottery industry. Bowls and dishes are popular along with larger storage jars. At first these were hand made by the coil method, but later, around the second century BC the potter's wheel was introduced into Britain. These Iron Age pots can be very appealing with bold forms and burnished or incised decoration, but

they do not appear on the market too often. A repaired piece may be available for £100 to £200 whilst others in better condition will be much more. Other materials such as bone or shale was used for small personal items. Bone combs, pins and awls are sometimes found and occasionally beads and rings of polished shale.

In mainland Europe the Celts were flourishing. They were a diverse people with similar religion and culture and spoke the same Indo European language. From their tribal centres at Hallstatt in Austria and later at La Tene in Switzerland they began to produce a wonderful variety of objects in bronze and iron, all decorated in their distinctive Celtic style.

They were fierce warriors and fine horsemen, fond of feasting and apparently inclined to be loud and boastful! Their art certainly reflects their character. It is full of free flowing lines, swirls and curves and vibrant colours. The craft workers produced wonderful work for the chiefs and princes such as fine bronze helmets and profusely decorated shields, heavy bronze neck torcs and armlets and elaborate mirrors and cauldrons, most of which ended up in impressive burials. The ordinary people had to make do with smaller items such as cloak pins, fibulae and toilet articles.

During the fourth century BC the Celts were becoming restless. The population was growing and perhaps needing new land and raw materials they began to move south towards the Mediterranean. Cynics have suggested that they were moving nearer to the sources of their beloved wines which they consumed in vast quantities and had to transport great distances.

Under their leader Brennus, thirty thousand Celtic warriors made swift progress into the Balkans and Greece, eventually reaching Delphi. Gold from the Delphic treasury was taken back to Gaul before the Greeks, aided by a severe winter, drove them back. After similar early success in Italy the Celts were repulsed by the increasingly powerful Romans. Turning their sights westwards to Gaul, Spain and Britain thousands of Celtic warriors and their families were on the move, arriving in Britain in the third century BC.

Roman writers tell us that the Celts found it impossible to unite together for very long so we find the various tribes settling in their own tribal areas, each with its own centre or oppidium. There was obviously some tension as we find hillforts being established around this time, many of which continued to be used right up until the Roman invasion in the first century AD.

To the Celts certain animals were revered or even sacred. The horse and its goddess Epona was a great favourite. Epona was sometimes depicted as a white mare. Perhaps the lively white horses carved into the chalk hillsides are meant to represent her. The bull and the boar were symbols of great power and strength, used to protect warriors in combat. The dog was also important, especially in hunting. All of these creatures are found represented on Celtic artefacts, sometimes in very stylised form. Another favourite cult centred around the severed human head. The Celts believed that the head was the site of the soul and they often decapitated their enemies to carry off the heads as valuable and powerful trophies.

Other decorative elements such as trumpets, cornucopias, triskeles and lotus buds had been carried over from La Tene and were widely used in Britain. The Celts used all of these on the rein rings and harness decoration for their horses. So abundant and flamboyant were the bronze ornaments that it is a wonder the poor creatures could break into a gallop, but the Romans assure us that they did!

The collector should be able to find a variety of horse decoration and chariot fittings. Simple pieces start from £50 whilst the more stylish and enamelled pieces can be £100 or more. A really fine piece of red and blue enamel measuring three inches or so can make £500 or even more. Fibulae and brooches are usually available from £30 to £75, but anything with animals will command a higher price. A range of bronze toggles or dress fasteners were made exclusively in these islands and are found mostly in the west and north. They are quite inexpensive, being no more than £40 or £50 for most examples.

The sacred animals mentioned above sometimes appear on decorative studs used to adorn leatherwork, belts and straps etc. They also appear on the handle mounts from ceremonial buckets. These are widely sought by collectors and good specimens can make £150 to £250 each, more if you are lucky enough to find a matching pair.

After the Roman invasion the Celtic metal workers were prevented from making weapons and armour for their tribal princes so they turned their attention to satisfying the needs of the civilian market. A kind of mass production came into being producing small personal and domestic items. As Romanization spread from the south the Celtic workers migrated northwards into the territory of the Brigantes and eventually into Scotland where they still flourished into the third century AD.

Celtic art continued to survive in a few western outposts such as Ireland, until medieval times. Today there is something of a revival of the art and mythology in the New Age movements. Luckily for collectors there is a wide range of smaller bronze pieces from the British Isles on offer at very affordable prices. It is also possible to add a few pieces from mainland Europe to increase the scope of a collection.



8
Bronze seated and bound captive figurine. Northumberland. A rare item. Circa first to second century AD. £195.



9
Enamelled stud found in Essex. Circa first century AD. 25mm. £50.



10
Enamelled stud with 'eyes' motif from Kent. 23mm. £55.



11
Domed stud with triskeles motif. Glos. 25mm. £85.

Photographs ex the Author's collection and the Leslie Harrison collection.



12
Applique bust of a young male. From Oxfordshire. 30mm. £85.



13
Bronze knobbed terret ring found in Northumberland. 50mm in diameter. First to second century AD. £95.



14
Bronze bull's head bucket handle mount found near York. 55mm long. £125.



17
Running horse stud found in Norfolk. 25mm long. £110.



15
Sandstone head of a male found in the west of England. Circa first century AD. 11cm in height. £350.



16
Bronze applique ornament in the forepart of a boar. Found in Essex. 30mm high. £75.

The antiquities series will continue in our next edition with Roman Britain. This is still being negotiated and may require a second part in the subsequent edition.