

When the Celts Had Rome at Their Mercy

*A small group of ragtag soldiers once took
on the greatest army on Earth.
Story and photos by Steve Melia*



Capitoline Hill

Amongst the European countries with a Celtic heritage, one of the most important – Italy – is almost unknown outside its own borders. This airbrushing from history is not new and may have even been deliberate. It followed a dramatic event around 390 BC, which threatened to strangle the Roman empire at its birth, and involved a Celtic people, the Senones, and their leader, Brennus. I briefly crossed their territory around Ancona at the end of my cycle ride across Europe last year, but I arrived on a Monday, when the museum I had hoped to visit was closed. So, recently, I set out again, this time by train, to follow the trail of the Senones and their legendary leader.

The question of where the Celtic peo-

ples and their languages first emerged is uncertain, but some recent evidence points towards central France. The Senones who attacked Rome lived in northeast Italy, but people called Senones also lived in Gaul, around the modern town of Sens, where a golden statue of Brennus stands outside the town hall. Were they branches of the same people? Did they move between the two? The evidence I had read was unclear and I hoped to learn more.

My journey began on the train through the Channel Tunnel to Paris Gare du Nord, with its scruffy interior and majestic Greco-Roman facade. I stopped in Paris to stay with my old friend Sylvain and visit the National Archaeological Museum in the chateau

of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in the western suburbs. We boarded the RER, the regional metro, in the centre of Paris, where it runs underground until it emerges on a viaduct, rising above the River Seine towards the chateau and its park overlooking the valley.

Napoleon III commissioned the museum in the 1850s to showcase the Celtic origins of France, a key element of his nationalist agenda. When it opened in 1867 its refurbishment was incomplete and the few Gaulish displays disappointed him. The public was more impressed, flocking there in their thousands, and today it houses the biggest Gaulish collection in France.

Whether the disparate peoples of early Gaul recognized a common identity we do not know, but sometime between the early and late Iron Ages their objects began to display an unmistakably Celtic style.

Interestingly, it was the same style I had seen in the British museum earlier this year. Amongst the weapons, human remains, and statues of deities, were many objects made for mundane purposes, cast into weird and wonderful forms. The lynchpin of a chariot's axle stares at the viewer with a face part-human, part-animal. The mouths and tails of interlocking monsters form a circular bronze cast, of unknown purpose, buried with the charioteer. There is none of the realism we find in Greek and Roman art, but does that make it more primitive? An information board compares the style to Cubism in the



Sacred Goose - Capitoline Museum

early 20th Century.

According to Roman writer Livy, during the 5th Century BC, when Rome was still a fledgling city state, Gaul had grown so rich and populous that it was becoming difficult to govern. King Ambigatus asked his two nephews to lead the surplus populations of several tribes to “such homes as the gods might assign to them.” One group headed east: the other climbed over the Alps into Italy. We still don’t know how much truth lies behind that story, but whatever the sequence of events, within a couple of centuries several Celtic peoples were occupying northern Italy, which is where I was heading next.

The railway through the Alps follows river valleys where possible, and tunnels through the more difficult sections. It is hard to imagine how ancient peoples made their way through those mountains with animals and supplies to feed thousands of people. You might have heard of Hannibal’s epic journey through the Alps with his elephants; his Celtic allies had been there first and probably guided his army.

Between Bologna and Florence, the railway crosses the Apennine mountains. It mostly runs through tunnels, emerging only occasionally to give a brief glimpse of the peaks, not as high as the Alps, but still dusted



with snow.

By the 4th Century BC, the Celts of northern Italy had expanded their territory, but remained on the opposite side of the Apennines from the city state of Rome. Then, the Senones - the “last to come” - found the land they had settled insufficient. Their leader, Brennus, led an army across the Apennines to seize more. Livy and Plutarch both mention a disgruntled man, Arruns, who led the

Celts to his home town of Clusium (Chiusi today), to take revenge on his brother for seducing Arruns’ wife.

As the Celtic army approached, the Clusians appealed to Rome for help. The Romans were reluctant to send troops at first. Instead, they sent three patrician brothers, the Fabii brothers, to negotiate with the Celts. The Fabii were not known for their tact or diplomacy. They took offence at a “haughty answer” and took up arms, joining the defending army and killing a Celtic chief. This outrage, “contrary to the law of nations,” transformed the conflict. From now on, the Celts directed their anger towards Rome.

To begin with, they sent ambassadors to the Roman Senate, asking them to hand over the Fabii brothers for punishment. The Senate sympathised with their arguments but felt unable to hand over “men of such high rank.” The scene was set for war.

The two armies met by the River Allia, 15 km north of Rome. Livy is contemptuous of the Roman leaders who showed “as much disregard of the gods as of the enemy.” Unusually for a Roman writer, he credits Brennus with shrewder tactics, leading to a total victory. As the Roman troops tried to flee across the river, their heavy armour weighed them down and many of them drowned. The survivors scattered across the countryside; one group made it back to Rome, where they took refuge on the Capitoline Hill.

By the entrance to Rome’s Termini station stands a section of the Severan Walls, built just after the departure of Brennus’s army. Before then, all that stood between the Celts and the city of Rome were earthen ramparts with gates left open in the panic. Within the ramparts, the strongest fortifications surrounded the Capitoline Hill, which



Gaulish Shield - Musee d'Archeologie Nationale



Gaulish Skull - Musee d'Archeologie Nationale

also housed the city's most sacred sites. The youth of military age was instructed to join the soldiers there, leaving everyone else to flee or die.

Today, a colossal monument to Italian reunification dominates the northern approach to the Capitoline Hill. Behind it, a wide flight of steps leads up to the Capitoline Museum, where I met Curator Eloisa Doderro. In my last article I described the parade of the captured King Caratacus, 460 years later. The splendour that he would have seen

did not yet exist. In Brennus's time, the population of Rome was no more than 40,000. Eloisa led me behind the museum, where we looked down over the archaeological park. The Forum and some of the temples would have existed back then, she explained, but houses, built of wood or volcanic stone, would have covered most of the site.

The surviving accounts of the siege are a mixture of history and legend. Several of them mention the old patricians, who agreed to sit in their homes, awaiting their



**Casting with Sea Monsters -
Musee d'Archeologie Nationale**

fate. Livy describes a Celtic warrior, who was fascinated to find one sitting motionless in his courtyard. As he stretched out a hand to stroke the old man's beard, the old man struck him with his staff. At this, "the barbarian flamed into anger and killed him, and the others were butchered where they sat."

Archaeological evidence has confirmed Livy's observation that damage to the city was limited. When the Celts found the Capitol well defended, they settled in for a long siege. Their lines proved surprisingly porous, however, with tales of intrepid messengers, scaling the hill and returning the same way. When the Celts discovered one of these routes, they decided to use it for a nighttime attack. They climbed so silently that "even the dogs noticed nothing" until the sacred geese in the Temple of Juno cackled a warning, alerting the defenders, and saving the Capitol. In the 18th Century, the legend attached itself to two bronze sculptures, displayed in the museum. They are supposed to represent the sacred geese, but they look more like ducks to me.

After seven months, with both sides suffering from hunger and disease, Brennus agreed to a Roman offer of 1000 pounds of gold to end hostilities. As the Celts began to weigh the gold, the Romans complained that they were using heavier weights. At this point Brennus threw his sword onto the scales with a cry which would echo throughout history: *Vae victis!* Woe to the vanquished!

The Celts then withdrew from Rome. On that point all the ancient sources agree, though they disagree on what followed.

Some claim that an exiled Roman leader raised another army to intercept them, killing Brennus and retrieving the ransom. Modern historians treat those accounts with



**Gaulish warrior
- Musee d'Archeologie Nationale**

scepticism. Whatever happened, we know the Senones settled in the Marche region around Ancona, on Italy's east coast, which was my next destination.

The train from Rome to Ancona passes through the Apennines once again, only this time, there were fewer tunnels and more views of the mountains. The hilltop town of Trevi, midway between the two, was particularly spectacular. In the mountains near Ancona archaeologists from the Nineteenth Century onwards have found evidence of Celtic settlement, which is now displayed in Ancona's National Archaeological Museum.

The museum is housed in a renaissance palace perched on a hill with panoramic views over the bay and the ferry port. After my disappointment last year, it was deeply

satisfying to walk through its open doors. What a contrast to the crowds of Rome. In three and a half hours I spoke to several staff but saw no other visitors.

Director Diego Voltolini showed me the collection, which fills three rooms. We discovered that we could communicate best in French, which reminded me of where my journey began. I asked him whether he believed the French and Italian Senones were branches of the same people and his reply was one I had not heard before. We only know the names of these ancient peoples through Roman or Greek writers, he said. They sometimes misunderstood what they heard, so the fact they used the same name for two peoples doesn't necessarily mean they were connected. Alas, perhaps that

golden statue in Sens owes more to legend than history.

The star items of the Senone collection are golden adornments from the tomb of a high-status woman, nicknamed the "Princess of Montefortino di Arcevia." There were also elaborately decorated weapons, including a bronze helmet with a frame on top, designed to hold feathers. The collection was more eclectic than other Celtic hoards I have seen, with imports and influences from Greece and surrounding peoples, but some of the objects were clearly Celtic. They arrived abruptly in the region during the 4th Century BC, which corroborates the ancient accounts of Senones settling here after the siege of Rome.

Eventually, of course, the Romans rebuilt their army, learned lessons, and went on to conquer the whole of Italy. It took them a hundred years to subdue the Senones, but the memory of their humiliating defeat would last much longer. It would leave their writers, and many modern readers, with a warped stereotype of the Celts as wild, uncivilized barbarians.

On my way back to the staircase, I was delighted to see another world-famous object. The Civitalba Frieze is a collection of terracotta figures depicting Celtic warriors recoiling in fear of the gods, whose wrath they have provoked. Some experts think it might commemorate another Celtic attack, on the Greek temple of Delphi, a century later. It was a fitting end to my journey through Italy because Greece, and Delphi, is where I was heading next.

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Steve at Roman Forum Site