

War, Ritual, and Symbolism: The Gallic Carnyx

The Gallic or Celtic carnyx is a type of trumpet held and played vertically with the bell curved to horizontal position and shaped in the form of a boar's head or other animal head. It was played in war to unite the Gallic troops, to intimidate the enemy with its loud, blaring sound, which was quite piercing due to its height, and to frighten opponents with its large boar or serpent head visage. Use of the carnyx is reported in the Gallic attack on Delphi in 279 BCE, Caesar's campaigns in Gaul in the 50s BCE, and Claudius' invasion of Britain in 43 CE. Diodorus in the *Histories* 5.30 says: "Their trumpets again are of a peculiar barbarian kind; they blow into them and produce a harsh sound which suits the tumult of war." The carnyx is one of the most distinctive identifying elements of the Gallic warrior, and is almost always depicted on Roman coins showing Gallic defeats (Crawford, *RRC* 282/1-5; 448/2a-3). It also appears on reliefs on Trajan's Column, and on the silver Gundestrup cauldron found in northern Denmark (probably of Celtic-Thracian origin) and dating to 150 BCE-50 CE. While fragments of carnyces have been excavated in Scotland, France, Germany, Romania and Switzerland, in 2004 seven carnyces, one almost complete, were excavated in a Gallic military and religious deposit dating to the time of Caesar's conquest in Tintignac, France, near Limoges. Evidence from the excavations suggests that the carnyces served a ritual as well as a military function. This paper analyzes the extraordinarily prominent place given to the carnyx in representations of Gauls by the Romans, and in Gallic art and burial deposits. Using the theories of cultural anthropologist Dan Sperber in his seminal work, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge 1975), it suggests that the carnyx functioned as a cultural symbol for the Gauls, containing a variety of meanings, in this case destructive as well as apotropaic and protective; meanings contradictory, and, consequently, inherently ambiguous, as many symbols are.