The Graeco-Roman world had many opportunities to observe Celtic armies in action. Their viewpoint was usually, though not invariably, that of opponents, and those who recorded the confrontations did so to communicate more than just ethnographic observations and the facts of history. The writing of Greek and Roman history was formulaic. Pausanias would describe the Celtic attack on Greece in the third century BC using the same structure and balance as did Herodotus when writing of the Persian Wars centuries earlier. This equation of Celts with Persians—two enemies of the civilized world—is found in a fragment of poetry preserved on a papyrus of the third century and recurs in sculptured form on the great victory monument erected by the Pergamene king Attalus I in Athens in the second century BC. The message is the same: the enemy from without is fierce and brutal but can be overcome by the Greek peoples working together for the common good. Pausanias was writing in the second century AD and was therefore using a variety of earlier sources, among them Hieronymus of Cardia, who had served the Pergamene king Eumenes in the late fourth century BC, and Timaeus, who was in Athens during the Celtic raids, as well as other writers, including, perhaps, Menodotus of Perinthus and Agatharchides of Cnidus. The range of information available to him was varied, but the selection of material and its presentation were rigidly circumscribed by convention.

One of the key figures in the Roman historical tradition was Polybius, a citizen of the Greek town of Megalopolis who had been deported to Rome in 168 BC. Polybius'
intention was to present the Celts as a formative influence on the development of Roman military power. In his view the initial invasion in the early fourth century and the continuous threat created by the Celtic settlement in the Po valley were instrumental in the honing of Rome’s military competence. For him the frenetic Celts are to be presented as a contrast to the calm efficiency of the Roman army. While the Romans are steadfast, level-headed, well led, and achieve victory by dogged determination, the Celts are volatile and unpredictable and, though fierce in the initial onslaught, can easily lose heart and panic. It is, therefore, to their antithetical qualities, when compared with the Romans, that he gives most attention. The History of Polybius provided one of the prime sources used by Livy (59 BC–AD 17) for his own History, and, while it is evident that Livy had other sources of information on the Celts, the influence of Polybius’ thesis is clear. Once more the Celts are presented as impulsive barbarians with an inability to plan rationally.

The narrative history of Polybius was continued by Poseidonius for the period 145–82 BC. The importance of Poseidonius (135–51 BC) is that he travelled widely in the Alps, Gaul, Spain, and possibly also Britain, observing for himself different Celtic societies in different states of development. His description of the Celts has survived only in the works of other writers, notably Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Athenaeus, and Caesar, but when these are taken together it is clear that Poseidonius was a keen observer with the eye of an anthropologist and was well aware of the changes that were taking place. From his viewpoint as a Stoic he may be critical of many of the more irrational and exuberant aspects of Celtic society and tend to over-emphasize them, but what he offers has the ring of truthful reporting. His approach is to present the Celt as a Noble Savage—a natural man untarnished by civilization—but in pointing up the contrast to the civilized world he was prone to overstatement.

Julius Caesar probably used Poseidonius as a source, but he also had the unique opportunity of observing a variety of Celtic tribes from close at hand during his eight years of campaigning. His war Commentaries are, by their very nature, biased sources. Caesar is at pains to present the Celts in a way that would have been familiar to his audience, playing on old prejudices. He emphasized the fierceness and unreliability of the enemy, thereby enhancing his own achievements and providing a justification for his actions amounting in some cases to genocide. While his descriptions of Celtic society in Gaul and his picture of Britain and the Britons may be selective interpolations culled from other sources, there is much in his general accounts of military and political matters that is highly informative about the Celtic communities he was confronting.

Of the later sources, Tacitus offers new insights, particularly about the Britons. Once more there is a reliance on stock stereotypes and the bias inherent in using the