

The First Britons: A Tribal System



- First record of tribal or individual names
- Recorded by Julius Caesar in 55/54 BCE
- Visited the south-east corner only
- He came, he saw, he did not conquer

As noted in the Introduction unit, the first verifiable historical references to Britain and its people are those of Pytheas in the fourth century BCE. However, these are generic names for the island as a whole and its inhabitants. There is no specific information on social organisation, or names of influential individuals. This had to wait almost 300 years until the raids of Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 BCE, and the Britain that he saw was based upon a tribal system.

It should be noted that all of these tribes are from the south-eastern corner of the island. This is the only part of Britain that Caesar encountered. Those tribes from the western and northern areas were deemed to be less civilised, being further away from the part of Britain that Rome knew, and of course from Rome itself.

The tribes in the map above are based on the work of Ptolemy, who wrote in the middle of the second century CE. However, the tribes that Caesar recorded two centuries earlier are still shown at this time. The following are the most familiar:

The Catuvellauni, with their capital at Verulamium (St. Albans) from about 20 BCE

The Trinovantes, with their capital at Camulodunum (Colchester)

The Atrebates, with their capital at Calleva (Silchester)

The Cantiaci, with their capital at Canterbury

The Iceni, who in the first century CE would lead Britain's largest revolt against the Romans.

Image courtesy of notuncurious.

Caesar's view of Britain



- ▶ A triangular island
- ▶ One coast leaning towards Spain
- ▶ More civilised along the coastal areas
- ▶ Inland people ate only flesh and milk
- ▶ Painted themselves blue before battle

Caesar wrote about Britain in his *De Bello Gallico* (The Gallic Wars). These books provide fascinating information on the Roman view of Britain. According to him, the Romans believed that the island was 'triangular in its form' and that one side leaned towards Spain (DBG, 5.13). Ireland was thought to be half the size of Britain, whereas it is actually more like a third. Winters were deemed to be less severe than in Gaul, probably because of Britain's maritime climate.

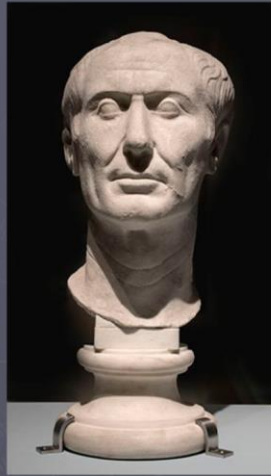
As for the people, the interior was inhabited by peoples native to the island, but the coastal areas were occupied by Belgae (from which comes the name Belgium, and which Caesar notes as being one of the three parts of Gaul). There were many people living in 'exceedingly numerous' buildings, similar to those of Gaul. (DBG, 5.12).

Those of Kent were the most civilised, not much different in their customs to the Gauls. The inland inhabitants, however, did not sow corn, but instead lived on milk and flesh and wore skins (DBG, 5.14). They had long hair and shaved all parts of their body with the exception of head hair and moustaches, and they shared wives. In battle, all Britons dyed themselves with woad, which turned blue and gave them a terrifying appearance. This tradition was still practised by the Picts many years later.

Caesar gives a detailed account of how the Britons used chariots in battle (DBG, 4.33). He notes that they first of all cause chaos and confusion by driving in all directions. The charioteer drives and remains in the chariot but the warriors alongside them then disembark to fight on foot with the enemy. The charioteers were very skilful and could stop their horses instantly even at speed and on steep slopes. Initially, this method of warfare caused fear amongst the Roman fighting men.

Image: A British Library collection drawing from circa 1574 showing two Ancient Britons based on classical descriptions (BL Add MS 28330).

55 BC and all that



- ▶ Caesar's first invasion of Britain
- ▶ Noted in Book 4 of his *De Bello Gallico*
- ▶ No natives of Britain mentioned in 55 BC
- ▶ Commius used as an ambassador

Although Caesar's primary objective was the conquest of Gaul, Britain often provided shelter for fleeing Gauls (DBG 4.20) and so ended up being dragged into the conflict. In his first raid of 55 BCE, Caesar mentions Commius the Atrebatian by name. The Atrebates had lands on both side of the channel, but Commius was a native of Gaul, and so no natives of Britain are mentioned at this time.

After conquering his lands in Gaul, Caesar made Commius king of the Atrebates and tried to use him as an ambassador to Britain. When sent to Britain in advance of the first expedition, Commius was captured, but later released back to Caesar on terms. Commius would eventually end up fighting against the Romans.

Caesar returned in 54 BCE, and on this occasion became the first person to name natives of the island, who would in turn become the Britons first known to the historical record. In the century or so between Caesar's raid in 55 BCE and Claudius' invasion in 43 CE, other Britons, from this period, free from Roman rule (if not influence) are known, either from coin inscriptions or pro-Roman writers. The information is therefore both patchy and a possible victim of propaganda. In some cases, numismatic evidence, in the form of inscribed coins, is all we have.

The following slides refer to some of these first known Britons. For the sake of consistency, names are given in their Romanised forms, although the names of the leaders of the Catuvellauni, namely Cassivellaunus, Tasciovanus, Cunobelinus and Caratacus have survived in Welsh as Caswallawn, Teuhant, Cynfelyn and Caradog respectively. Cunobelinus is also the Cymbeline of Shakespeare's play.

Image of bust of Caesar at Museo di antichità di Torino courtesy of Ángel M. Felicísimo, Mérida, Spain,

The first Briton known to history: Cassivellaunus (Caswallawn)



- ▶ The first native of Britain known to history
- ▶ Not many modern-day natives of Britain are aware of this
- ▶ Led the British resistance to Caesar in his second raid of 54 BCE
- ▶ Aided by four kings of the Cantiaci
- ▶ Betrayed by his rivals the Trinovantes

The honour of being the first ever historically known person believed to be a native of Britain goes to Cassivellaunus, King of the Catuvellauni (Norman Davies, *The Isles*, p. 59). Cassivellaunus led the British resistance to Caesar's second raid in 54 BCE, with the support of four kings of the Cantiaci (see below). The British, however, were not united in their opposition, due to inter-tribal fighting and differing approaches as to how to deal with Caesar. In particular, the Catuvellauni were regularly at war with their neighbours the Trinovantes.

After deciding to use guerrilla tactics to combat the Romans, Cassivellaunus' location was betrayed to Caesar by the Trinovantes, and Cassivellaunus surrendered. He was then forced to accept terms, which included accepting Mandubracius as leader of his rival tribe, and paying an annual tribute to Rome. Caesar used Commius the Atrebatian as mediator.

The 'four kings of the Cantiaci' who helped Cassivellaunus against Caesar were, Carvilius, Cingetorix, Segovax and Taximagulus. The 'rix' of Cingetorix means roughly 'king' and is cognate with the Latin 'rex'. The Brittonic language at this time was very similar to Gaulish (which was one of the reasons why Gauls would flee to Britain) and so 'rix' can also be seen in Gaulish names such as Vercingetorix (not to mention Asterix!)

Despite losing this battle, Cassivellaunus continued to rule as leader of the Catuvellauni until long after Caesar's departure. The Romans would not return for nearly 100 years. He was one of the first Britons to mint gold coins, and his name appears as Cassibelaunus in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and as Caswallawn in medieval Welsh literature.

The above image is of a commemorative inscription near Devil's Dyke, Hertfordshire, where Cassivellaunus is thought to have surrendered to Caesar. Courtesy of Colin Riegels.

A Catuvellaunian Dynasty: Tasciovanus (Teuhant)



- ▶ Took over from Cassivellaunus
- ▶ Only known from coin inscriptions
- ▶ Briefly issued coins from Verulamium and Camulodunum
- ▶ Passed the kingdom on to his son

Cassivellaunus was succeeded as king by Tasciovanus. The two were almost certainly related but the written sources we have are medieval ones, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and are not entirely reliable. These have Tasciovanus as the son of Cassivellanus' brother Lud (Welsh *Lludd*) which would have made them uncle and nephew.

Other than this source, the only evidence we have for him comes from coin inscriptions. He seems to have become king of the Catuvellauni in about 20 BCE, and to have also taken over the Trinovantes between about 15–10 BCE. Tasciovanus moved the capital of the Catuvellauni from Devil's Dyke, shown on the previous slide, to Verulamium, modern day St. Albans. The Trinovantes, meanwhile, had their capital at Camulodunum (modern day Colchester), and Tasciovanus, for a short while, issued coins from the two, implying that he ruled over both territories.

He probably died in the year 9 CE, and although he most likely inherited his kingdom from his uncle, he certainly passed it on to his son, and founded a dynasty of kings which would continue until the Claudian conquest.

Image: Coin issued by Tasciovanus held at the British Museum

A Catuvellaunian Dynasty: Cunobelinus (Cynfelin)



- Tasciovanus was succeeded by his son Cunobelinus
- He also minted coins from both Verulamium and Camulodunum
- At the heart of Catuvellaunian expansion

Cunobelinus is known in Welsh as Cynfelyn and in the Shakespearian play as Cymbeline. He took over where Tasciovanus left off, while another son, Epaticcus, probably with Cunobelinus' consent, moved westwards into the land of the Atrebates in the 20s CE, and for some time took over their capital of Calleva (modern day Silchester). Epaticcus died in about the year 35, after which time the Atrebates gained some of their territory back. Cunobelinus, however, like his father, minted coins from both Camulodunum and Verulamium. During his reign, there seem to have been increased trading links with the Roman empire, as noted by the historian Strabo, and Cunobelinus was not afraid to use the title REX on his coins. He died in the early 40s, just prior to the Roman invasion of Britain in the year 43.

The first decades of the first century witnessed a growth in the influence of the Catuvellauni over their neighbours. Cunobelinus had three sons, Togodumnus, Adminius and Caratacus (Welsh *Caradog*). Of these, Togodumnus ruled over the Catuvellauni themselves, while Adminius took control of the Cantiaci, and Caratacus conquered the Atrebates. It was Togodumnus and Caratacus who led the resistance to Claudius' invasion of 43 CE, where Togodumnus was killed in a battle on the Thames.

Caratacus fled and remained at large until the year 51 and so we shall return to him in the next unit.

Adminius, meanwhile, seems to have taken control of the Cantiaci by about the year 35, but was banished from Britain by his father Cunobelinus some five years later. Adminius then indulged in the popular pastime of seeking refuge with the Roman emperor, in this case Caligula. Caligula subsequently planned an invasion of Britain, but never carried it out.

Image: Four coins of Cunobelinus as drawn in Camden's *Britannia* (1607)

Neighbours of the Catuvellauni: The Trinovantes



- ▶ Probably the most influential British tribe before the rise of the Catuvellauni
- ▶ Cassivellaunus killed their leader Imanuentius but was forced by Caesar to accept Imanuentius' son Mandubracius as ruler of the Trinovantes
- ▶ Addedomarus: first king to issue inscribed coins north of the Thames
- ▶ Dubnovellaunus lost his territory to Cunobelinus
- ▶ Camulodunum thought by some to be Camelot

From references in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, it seems that the Trinovantes had been the most influential tribe in the south-east of Britain before Cassivellaunus killed Imanuentius, their leader. This resulted in Imanuentius' son Mandubracius fleeing to Gaul to seek Caesar's protection. While on his expedition of 54 BCE, the Trinovantes betrayed Cassivellaunus' location to Caesar, who then besieged him and ultimately forced him to surrender and make terms. Part of those terms included installing Mandubracius as king of the Trinovantes, and Cassivellaunus promising not to make war against him.

The next known king of the Trinovantes was Addedomarus, who produced the first inscribed coins north of the Thames sometime between 35 and 15 BCE. He was in turn succeeded by Dubnovellaunus between about 10–5 BCE, who reigned for many years before losing control of his territory to Cunobelinus of the Catuvellauni. After this the Trinovantes largely disappear from the historical record until they re-emerge by taking part in Boudicca's revolt in the 60s. Boudicca's tribe, the Iceni, were their neighbours to the north.

Their capital city, Camulodunum, modern day Colchester, is thought by some to be the basis for the legendary city of Camelot.

Image: Gold coins of Addedomarus on display at the Museum of London, courtesy of PHGCOM

Neighbours of the Catuvellauni: The Atrebates



- ▶ A Belgic tribe with lands on both sides of the channel
- ▶ Ruled by one, or perhaps two, kings called Commius until 20 BCE
- ▶ Atrebatian territory split in two for about twenty five years after Commius' death
- ▶ Reunited under one leader Eppillus, and Verica, his brother, from 15 CE
- ▶ Conquest of Verica's territory by Caratacus was used as justification for Roman invasion

The Atrebates were a Belgic tribe with lands on both sides of the channel. We have already mentioned Commius the Atrebatian and his role in Caesar's raids of 55 and 54 BCE. A king called Commius was also ruler of the Atrebates in Britain at around 30 BCE and issued coins until circa 20 BCE. However, this is quite a long time from the year 55, and it is possible, although not certain, that there were two kings, father and son, with the same name.

In any event, the Commius of 20 BCE had three known recorded sons, namely Tincomarus, Eppillus and Verica. Tincomarus seems to have ruled jointly with his father from about 25 BCE until his father's death, after which the territory appears to have been divided into a northern part, ruled by Tincomarus from Calleva, and a southern part ruled by Eppillus from Noviomagus (modern day Chichester). Eppillus became sole ruler in about the year 7 CE, and Verica took over about 8 years later, ruling from Calleva until just before the Claudian conquest.

Caratacus subsequent conquest of the Atrebates gave Verica his own opportunity to seek refuge with a Roman emperor, who by this time was Claudius. This provided Claudius with an appropriate excuse to invade Britain, and, unlike Caligula before him, he went ahead with it in the year 43. This invasion and its consequences will form the basis of the next unit.

Image: Coins of Tincomarus, with the letters TINC clearly visible, from a display held at the British Museum.