



UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVIDS, BA CELTIC STUDIES, FULL TIME DISTANCE LEARNING MODULE REF. HPCS 5/6016

The Celts Through the Eyes of the Greeks and Romans

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Assessment Component 1 - Written Assignment 2,500 words (Level 5 and 6): Written essay (approximately 2,500 words) option #4:

Examine the ways in which the literacy of the Mediterranean civilisations spread into Celtic-speaking societies. Your answer may focus on one region, but should draw comparisons with others. (Lecturer: David Parsons)

Deadline for assignment 1: 24 April 2023

Assignment Modus Operandi

At the outset, we will briefly review the situation in southern Britain during the period from the first century BC to that of the coming Claudian invasion of 43AD and its aftermath to suggest any worthwhile evidence. Secondly, the next three centuries are a period of overwhelming Latin domination and we look at the extent of this from a number of source reference materials in relation to Britain in general. Thirdly, with this fundamental shift to widespread literacy in what had been a foreign language, we look at the post-imperial position taking us up to the

early mediaeval periods and the impressive codices of the illuminated Gospels together with other related evidence.

Early numismatic and other evidence in Britain during the first century CE

In one respect, the idea of coin usage is something of a reversal of the Module title's theme in that the adaptation of coin currency by British societies is a necessary reaction to the economic system developed elsewhere, for example as a consequence of cross-channel trade with the Continent, itself an environment where there had been adoption of Mediterranean trading using coinage ranging from precious metals to bronze. The successive adoption of, for example, silver coinage throughout the Roman world meant that eventually this would have some kind of culturally diffused impact into the interior world of central Europe, more specifically, the Celtic world. This was certainly the case during the century of conquest of Gaul prior to the British invasion of the Emperor Claudius in AD 43 . We can see the influence of this by reference to a large range of imitative coinage particularly relative to the southern areas of Britain bearing the names of the lineage of the Catuvellauni tribal regime and the Belgae, among others, prior to the Neronian coinage issued in the aftermath of the Emperor Claudius' death. In some respects this adoption of a monetary economic system was inevitable in order to 'regularise' the system of finance by taxation as a major force for social compliance throughout the Empire. If for no other reason, the sight of a written form of the king's name on a piece of metal was at least a kind of introduction to the process of communication, and power and influence by the written word. But to the higher echelons of society, the written word might not have been so uncommon as might be thought. Caesar describes the customs of the Gauls, especially in Book 6 of the Gallic War, where he briefly describes the Druids. He mentions in chapter 14 that the Druids use Greek characters if they ever commit anything to written form:

‘ the Druids learn by heart a great number of verses, . . . do not think it proper to commit these utterances to writing, although in almost all other matters, and in their public and private accounts, they make use of Greek letters.’ ¹

But of course the druidic fraternity was established in Britain centuries before any attempts at eradication in the first century CE. It is likely that they, too, had knowledge of Continental alphabetical systems.

In any case, Cassivellaunus, who led the resistance to Julius Caesar in 54 BCE, King of the Catuvellauni, was one of the first British leaders to mint gold coins, his name appearing as ‘Cassibelaunus’. Later tribal leaders such as Cunobelinus followed suit as part of an established monetary system common to the lowland zone of south east and south west Britain prior to the Claudian invasion of 43CE. In the case of Cunobelinus, the power and influence of his reign is perhaps reflected in the extant coinage. The name appears as Latinised Brythonic for some kind of canine (‘ku’, ‘kunos’, later mutating into modern Welsh as ‘ci’ and plural ‘cwn’):

. . . The many surviving coins from the mint are stamped with Latin slogans and figures from mythology. His power and influence were so extensively felt in Britain that the Roman biographer Suetonius referred to him as *Britannorum rex* “King of the Britons” ²

Following the Claudian campaign, whilst some local tribal communities came to terms with the takeover, others did not. In the case of Caratacus, chieftain over the south-east Wales Silurian tribe, resistance was maintained over the following decade. With his eventual capture by Queen Cartimandua, of the Brigantes tribe, who largely pursued a pro-Roman stance, it seems likely that both had some knowledge of Latin as the Queen subsequently turned in Caratacus, who, according to the historian Cornelius Tacitus, made an impassioned speech to the Roman Senate when expelled from Britain as a prisoner. ³

¹ CAESAR GALLIC WAR Book VI (chapters 11-20)

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cunobelinus>

³ XII.37 Tacitus *The Annals*, trans. by A. J. Woodman, 2004, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett.

Latin literacy that occurred as a continuous process prior to the Caudian campaign and accelerated subsequently is a study or commentary by both recent and classical authors. Taking, for example, a recent review, when discussing the role of Gnaeus Julius Agricola, an early governor of Britain, (Tacitus XXI) Carl Mazurek (Mazurek 2008) draws attention to a perceived program of urbanization, together with education for the sons of 'leading men'. The argument seems to be one of a planned package of measures involving modernization of living space and its quality, lifestyle and goods, all cemented together with the status of Latin literacy. By consent of the former ruling class, their status is contemporised and enhanced, in their eyes, to the new and improved imperial standard. .

' In the second century AD, the Roman writer Aelius Aristides asserted that the Roman Empire was the first that rested on consent rather than on force. While this was obviously an exaggeration, it was nevertheless based upon a fundamental truth, namely that the Romans were able to control many areas by winning the consent of the ruling class. A fundamental aspect of this was Romanization, or the adoption of Roman culture by other peoples. In his *Agricola*, Tacitus himself writes of his father-in-law actively encouraging the process. Recently, however, the trend has been to dismiss this passage as an effort to magnify the achievements of Agricola, and to see Romanization not as a state-sponsored program, but rather as a process initiated largely by the locals themselves.' ⁴

An overall picture is painted by Tacitus of an active program of Roman urbanization during the late Julio-Claudian and Flavian period. Towns played an essential role in the Romanizing and urbanization of Britain. Returning, however, to Agricola 21, we find that Agricola's building program constituted only a part of the plan. The sons of "leading men" were additionally encouraged towards a Roman education and lifestyle symbolized by the adoption of the Latin language. This being a consolidation of future allegiance to the new order by way of the younger, emerging generation. In the main, the whole process seems to have occurred as a relatively smooth transition:

⁴ *Agricola 21 and the Flavian Romanization of Britain* Carl Mazurek 2008 pp 41-47 in HIRUNDO 2008 The McGill Journal of Classical Studies, Vol. 6

‘ The Romans developed a system of provincial administration which perpetuated, at least initially, the existing tribal framework. Thus in Britain they created, between ad 70 and ad 120, about fifteen self-governing tribal authorities (*civitates*), each with elected magistrates and council and each based on a major town. The first such grants of local self-government were in the areas which had shown political sophistication before the invasion—Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire, and Buckinghamshire, where the *civitates* of the Cantiaci, the Trinovantes, and the Catuvellauni were established. Other *civitates* were added later, and there is little doubt that the first magistrates and councillors were drawn from the old tribal élites. By CE 80, according to Tacitus, the Britons were widely adopting Roman fashion in housing, clothing, language, and diet. Houses with mosaics, plastered walls and ceilings, under-floor heating, and their own bath-suites were built in town and country alike. Roman shoes and sandals were made. Along with wine, a variety of amphorae demonstrate that olive oil, fish-sauce, and other exotic foodstuffs were imported from the Mediterranean.’ ⁵

Monumental latin and other data sources during the Occupation

Outward displays of provincial Latinity were eventually to be seen increasingly in public spaces by everyone who was part of the urban community or merely visiting. In specific connexion with Wales, we can note this in two southern tribal civites, Venta Silurum in the east (representative of the Silurian tribal area) and Maridunum Demetorum in the south-west (representing the Demetae), now known as Caerwent and Carmarthen. In the case of Caerwent we see a substantial survival of this tradition. This is particularly significant as the area is strongly associated with Caratacus and the Silurian rebellion in the aftermath of the conquest. A pedestal for a lost (assumed) statue commemorating Tiberius Claudius Paulinus, the commandant of the Second Augustan Legion during the period 214 - 217 CE was recovered from the area now occupied by Saint Stephen’s Church within the original area of the civitas and bears the inscription which indicates a local council administration:

To (Tiberius Claudius) Paulinus (once) commander of the second Augustan legion (next) proconsul of the province Gallia Narbonensis (now) Imperial Governor province of Lugdunensis by decree of the council of the community of the state of the Silures. ⁶

⁵ <https://www.oxfordreference.com> ‘Britons’

⁶ ‘The Paulinus Stone’ or ‘The Civitas Silurum Stone’ (see for example <https://coflein.gov.uk>)

These civic displays were largely based on the professionally executed inscriptions often associated with legionary sites such as the major conurbation of Caerleon in latter-day Gwent (a contraction Caerwent from 'Venta' in the Venta Silurum), where burials are indicated for the inhabitants and legionary recruits from various locations within the Empire, and are prefixed by the Latin abbreviations D M (Dis Manibus) indicating the 'Shades of Dis', the spirits of the Underworld. A particularly comprehensive collection of examples was included by John Obadiah Westwood in his publication *Lapidarium Walliae*, recording the condition and legibility of such survivals in the 19th century.⁷

Away from the environment of the Legionary centres or new urbanization, and within the private interior spaces of the rural villa, the owner could similarly impress his guests with something of an emblematic feature of the adopted overlaid Mediterranean world now beginning to envelope Britain in the form mosaic pavements, and possibly a knowledge of the Greek mythology upon which much of its artwork was based. Furthermore, in some cases we find script accompanying this, as for example in the site at Lullingstone Romano-British villa, where the proprietor indulged in extensive mosaic designs, including some with textual elaboration taken from the Vergil's *Aeneid* at which the owner would have taken advantage to display a knowledge of the mythology attached to the founding of Rome :

' . . . to the famous episode at the beginning of the *Aeneid* where Juno visits the west wind (Aeolus) to ask him to brew up a storm in order to drown her enemy (I, 50) [and the] mosaic is unique in the Roman Empire and was very probably copied from the owner's illustrated copy of the work.. . . In his school days he would certainly have studied Vergil and Ovid in depth, and learned the art of versification.' ⁸

Apart from these civilian dedications, the scope for study of the organization of Britannia as a kind of militarised and newly overtly literised province is substantial. Commemorative plaques for army centres or milestones now to be seen in museum spaces, but at the time when such items were originally located, would have been

⁷ see for example pp. 91 -100 of the illustration sections of the *Lapidarium*

⁸ Henig, Martin *Art, religion and letters in a fourth-century villa: the Lullingstone Villa mosaic* in <http://www.asprom.org/resources/Lullingstone/LullingstoneHenig.html>

a reminder to the illiterate country-dweller of the long tentacles of imperial administration and the contemporary emperor in whose honour the milestone or commemorative inscription would have been erected, as for example the large roadside stone block located at Water Street in the Kenfig-Margam area of south Wales, now removed to Margam Stones Museum as part of the Margam Abbey complex. (see illustration 1)

Post imperial Latin evidential sources and the illuminated Gospels

What remains of literary evidence for Latin usage among the educated strata is small but forms a core subject area for fertile research or commentary even down to the present century.⁹ For instance, Saint Patrick's autobiographical *Confessio* dates from the 5th century and by comparison to later biography of British saints as found in the British Library *Vespasian MS A xiv* is regarded as a less romanticised view of life in 5th century Britain and Ireland, lacking to a large degree the fantasy of miracle-working associated with sainthood. Indeed, Patrick might not have had any significant cognition of whether he qualified for that status. In some contrast, what remains of the work of the priest known by the title 'Gildas' and his contemporary appraisal of British life in the *De Excidio Brittonum* displays an in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament and Saint Jerome's 'Vulgate', from which Gildas' already rhetorical and colourful style is further elaborated by references to the *Book of Isaiah*, with its portrayal of banqueting, wine and seductive plucked sounds of the lyre or harp.

A more prosaic display of devotion is found in the area of commemorative cross-inscribed memorials, where short provincial Latin personal descriptions are to be seen, as for example a particularly well-preserved example located on the holy site on Caldey Island off the south Pembrokeshire coast, dedicated to Catuoconi (pro anime catuoconi) with prominent (original) cross above the text

⁹ See for instance the frequent references in **Snyder**, Christopher A. *The Britons* (2003: Oxford, Blackwell) and *An Age of Tyrants*, 1998.

[see illustration 2]. Such a personal record seems to have been widely adopted, as is seen in the most recent gazetteer of memorials drawn up by Nancy Edwards, Professor of Medieval Archaeology at Bangor University (see Bibl) and her colleagues, enhancing previous studies of the medium, common in Wales spanning some five centuries from the 5th. Allowing for the relatively awkward medium of inscription on a hard surface, the skill level of these scripts does vary considerably. The consecutive examples in illustration 3 below offer a reasonably typical comparison, with the foremost dedicated to 'Boduoc-' being quite distinctive in its effect and superior as compared with its neighbour dedicated to 'Pumpeius Carantorius'.

To gain a better idea of potential literacy in terms of reading and writing we have to eventually turn to what could be regarded as the final stage of the literate transformation of the British Isles and Ireland in the form of the Scriptures, appearing as a consequence of the earlier translation by Saint Jerome and his commission, resulting in a new Latin Vulgate drawn from Greek and other language versions including Latin. When we briefly review the work of the scribes, then, behind these gospel manuscripts (codices) of the early Medieval scriptoria, by comparison with the Catucon lettering, we are seeing more of the regularity of the imperial public inscriptions of centuries earlier in the sense of legibility and symmetry in the script, which is understandable when considering the medium of vellum — an admirable surface for the skills of quill and ink.

A number of outstanding examples include The Lindisfarne Gospels (or 'The Book of Lindisfarne'), compiled in the so-called 'insular script', dating at the close of the 7th century into the 8th CE. But there is an assumed earlier dating and tradition associated with this medium in the Irish ecclesiastical institutions.

` One of the most famous Irish illuminated manuscripts, and a masterpiece of early Medieval art, the Book of Durrow is the first of the fully decorated Gospel Books. A masterpiece of medieval Christian art, it probably dates to the period 650-680, despite a later inscription

which recorded the legend that it was copied out by St Columba (c.521-597) in the space of 12 days. This, at least, confirms its place of origin as one of the Columban group of monasteries, but it is still unclear whether it was produced at Iona (its chief foundation), in one of the Irish houses, or in Northumbria. Certain textual peculiarities link it with the Book of Kells, which would favour the Iona argument, but this has to be balanced by stylistic considerations, where there are greater affinities with north-eastern Britain.¹⁰

By this time we are obviously entering a systematic approach to conveying thought and information by writing. The term 'insular script' was subsequently allotted a set of definitions and 'grades' :

'The term 'Insular' has been applied to the form of script which initially developed from late Roman scripts in Ireland, but quickly spread to Anglo-Saxon England with the Irish settlements in Northumbria and elsewhere. The term has generally been accepted, given that it is very convenient in emphasising the fact that this script develops independently from continental traditions.

'From the seventh century we can identify a range of grades of Insular script in use. The grade selected in each case would depend on the type of manuscript being produced. Thus, great bibles and gospel books were copied in formal majuscule or semi-majuscule scripts (Uncial and Half-Uncial). These were display scripts derived from late Roman forms, characterised, among other things, by the use of *scriptura continua*, i.e., the absence of spaces between words.¹¹

Fundamentally these scripts are categorized as 'Roman', sometimes described as a 'system' . . . ' From about the beginning of the Christian era to the early seventh century this group of scripts pervaded the width and length of the Roman Empire. The hierarchical structure was dominated by Square Capitals, a set of letterforms particularly convenient for monumental epigraphic inscriptions (though very rarely found in manuscripts). Other more fluid forms, such as Rustic Capitals or the Old Roman Cursive, were used instead in manuscript contexts, as well as for private and administrative purposes. This group is normally described as the 'Old Roman System of Scripts'. However, by the early fourth century, these had already evolved into a 'New Roman System of Scripts', among which the most influential styles are Uncial and Half-Uncial.¹²

¹⁰

<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/book-of-durrow.htm>

¹¹ 'The Advent of Insular Minuscule', in School of Advanced Study: <https://port.sas.ac.uk/>

¹² Ibid.

The crucial expression in the above relates to fluidity and ease of use for personal use and a break from the monumental style, although, of course, this was not previously unknown as we now have illustrations of writing styles associated with messages and letters dating back to the era of the Vindolanda Roman legionary establishment and the message tablets found in the vicinity of Hadrian's Wall from excavations carried out in the 1970's and subsequently added to. Giving a perspective of ordinary day-to-day life in earlier Roman Britain, and indicating different writing styles and idioms involving ink on wood or erasable wax surface for stylus use.

Appendix

Illustrations

1 Milestone from Water Street in vicinity of present-day Port Talbot





2. Catuoconi memorial : St Illtyd's Church, part of the Old Priory on Caldey Island

3 Reverse of milestone in example 1 above re-used as grave marker, post-Roman period, with similar inscribed monuments (at front of row) located at the Margam Stones Museum, Port talbot



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