

Assignment Three - Research Focus (2,000 words) - Academic Skills (HHP4902)

Heidi Wyldewood (2110492)

Why was Winchester called the 'Market of the Belgae' at the end of the Iron Age?

The beautiful city of Winchester sits on the banks of the Itchen in the south of England. Once the country's capital, it is now the county city of Hampshire. Situated on the central south coast of Britain, Hampshire faces the English Channel and borders the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Berkshire, Surrey, and Sussex. Its rich history is one woven with trade and invasions, of which Winchester has seen its fair share. Southampton, after which Hampshire is named, and Portsmouth are the county's two other cities, both historically important and currently active ports. Before it was referred to as Venta Caester by the Saxons, which later mutated Wintancaester, then Winchester, it was called Venta Belgarum, or 'Market of the Belgae' by the Romans. This research essay briefly examines Iron Age life within Hampshire as a backdrop to the arrival of the Belgae who came originally from Gaul; establishes pre-Roman use of the Winchester site throughout the Iron Age; discusses the impact of Belgae in the Winchester area during the hundred years before Roman conquest; and concludes that they became the innovative elite, remaining recognisably distinct from the indigenous Britons at the time, so that the area around Winchester was defined by their presence, warranting a correspondingly named town. No written records exist, before a Roman Britain, so it is via the many archaeological findings and a looking back through the Roman lens that a glimpse of people living in the area more than two thousand years ago is to be had.

The Iron Age in Britain covers the period between the eighth century BC and the arrival of the Romans in first century AD.¹ The early part of the Iron Age saw extended family units in states of self-sufficiency inhabiting permanent dwellings, whilst shared farming areas may have been worked by more than one family. During this time reforestation indicates there may have been a major population loss in Britain, and whilst the eastern trade networks remained active and cross Channel routes intensified, the western and Atlantic networks dropped away.² As time progressed, larger communities developed, the people creating small settlements and hillforts. By the end of the Iron Age some tribes were loosely united in confederations and some areas of Britain contains evidence of towns, which the Romans called oppida.³ These 'large proto-urban defended settlements' were known to be spread throughout 'Gaul or France, central Europe, and parts of south-east Britain' and acted as centres for tribal organisation and trade.⁴

¹ Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain: An Account of England, Scotland and Wales From the Seventh Century BC Until the Roman Conquest*, 4th edn. (London: Routledge, 2005), <<https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=115931&site=ehost-live>> [accessed 8th January 2022].

² Barry Cunliffe, *Britain Begins*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 292.

³ Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*

⁴ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 1397.

It is well established that the territories in Britain known for their oppida were areas influenced by the Belgic-Gauls from Continental Europe. The Belgae are of particular interest regarding Hampshire, because the Romans documented them as one of two tribes dwelling or operating in the area when they arrived and post conquest, the other being the Atrebates.⁵

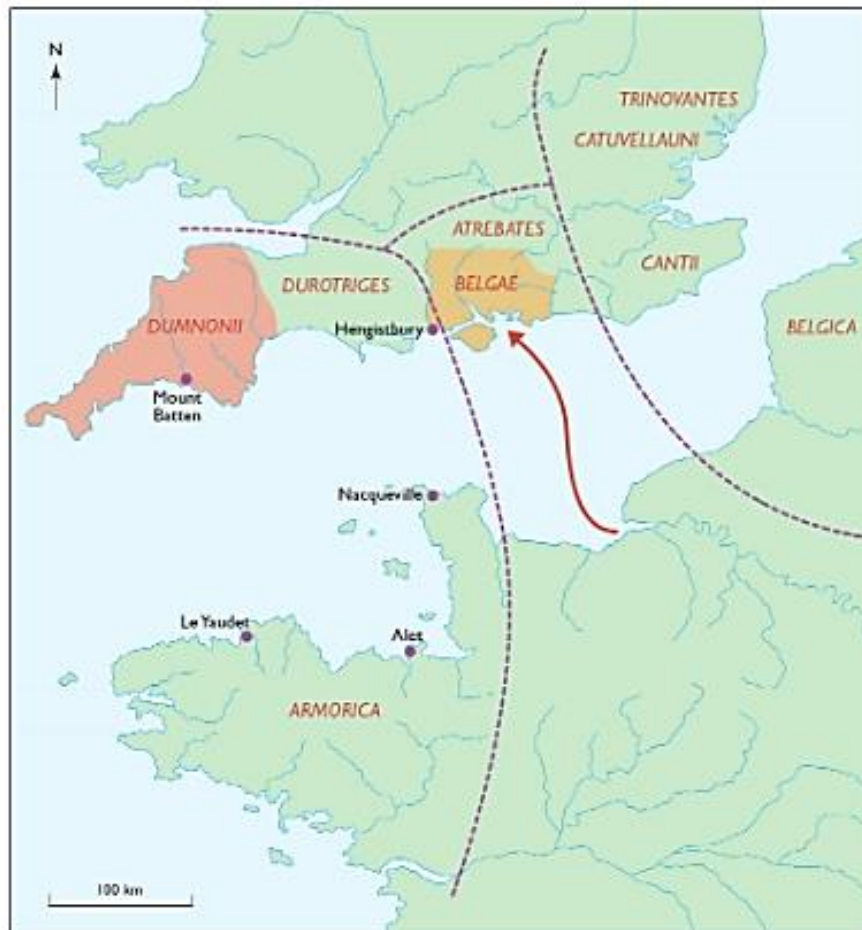


Fig 1. The unique position of Hampshire between two major trade routes⁶

Originally, the Belgae, as a group of Celtic speaking tribes, occupied an area stretching between the Seine and the Rhine in modern day Northern France, through to Belgium, and into parts of Luxembourg, Germany, and the Netherlands.⁷ With merchant routes long established across the English Channel, most of the original focus being on Thames and Kent, a little relocation, certainly not an aggressive influx as had been previously thought, happened during the late second and early first centuries BC, influencing culture. Later, as the Romans moved up from the south in Gaul, further expansion into the south coast of

⁵ Koch, *Celtic Culture*, pp. 195-196.

⁶ Cunliffe, *Britain Begins*, p. 334.

⁷ Koch, *Celtic Culture*, pp. 195-196.

Britain must have seemed an obvious move. It appears that a particular, possibly substantial, group from Belgic-Gaul decided to cross the Channel in the first century, landing 'somewhere on the Solent coast and settled in Hampshire', possibly with the intention to begin operating there, unrivalled by the re-established western trade route between Armorica and Hengistbury Head (Dorset) and the busy eastern routes of the Cantii tribe in Kent.⁸ Whether this group had previous connections with the indigenous people living in the area or with the Belgic Atrebates, who had slowly migrated across from the Thames region, is not known, but it was this distinct group of Belgae that the Romans later observed in the Hampshire area.

The immigration of these Belgae, named specifically by Caesar, is the only 'historically documented movement of a Celtic-speaking people from mainland Europe to the British Isles'.⁹ Caesar does note that some other tribal names in the south-east of Britain were indicative whence they came, and that throughout the regions they had subsequently integrated into, the homes and lifestyles of the area were similar to those he had witnessed in Gaul:

Nearly all of these latter are called after the names of the states from which they sprang when they went to Britain; and after the invasion they abode there and began to till the fields. The population is innumerable; the farm-buildings are found very close together, being very like those of the Gauls; and there is great store of cattle. They use either bronze, or gold coins, or instead of coined money tallies of iron, of a certain standard of weight. In the midland districts of Britain tin is produced, in the maritime iron, but of that there is only a small supply; the bronze they use is imported. There is timber of every kind, as in Gaul, save beech and pine. They account it wrong to eat of hare, fowl, and goose; but these they keep for pastime or pleasure. The climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the cold seasons more moderate.¹⁰

Those other tribes he alluded to here in the south of Britain are the Catuvellauni and the Atrebates, similarly named for the member tribes of the loosely connected larger group called the Belgae, across the channel. When dividing up the conquered Britons into *civitas*, the Romans located the Belgae in southern Hampshire and the Atrebates in Northern Hampshire, naming their administrative centres as *Venta Belgarum* and *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester), respectively.

With the Itchen River stretching from the Solent's coastline to a valley in chalk downland, it makes sense that the Winchester area appealed to the earliest people who settled down to farm the land. Plenty of resources were available for 'the tools, the pottery, the querns and so forth', needed daily living and the material culture gathered in the area shows that these were for the most part produced locally until Roman times.¹¹

⁸ Cunliffe, *Britain Begins*, p. 334

⁹ Koch, *Celtic Culture*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Caesar, *The Gallic War*, Book V. 12, trans. by H. J. Edwards, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917).

¹¹ Patrick Ottaway and others, 'Winchester Through The Ages', in *Winchester: Swithun's 'City Of Happiness And Good Fortune': An Archaeological Assessment*, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), <<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/j.ctt1s4757t>> [accessed 8th January 2022].

The Winchester site has been repeatedly built on throughout the centuries, with many previously concluding, because of lack of evidence, that it had only been a Roman centre rather than one extensively used prior. It has only been in the last fifty years that a clearer picture of the earlier site has been reconstructed via 'rescue excavations' ahead of new building work or redevelopments in the city itself.¹² An Iron Age bank surrounds Oram's Arbour there, part of which exists in its current incarnation as part of a park, stretching as a gated three-sided enclosure to its western side, with a smaller adjoining trackway mirrored to the eastern side around St Peter's Street, where the unfound fourth side of the enclosure, may have existed near Parchment Street.¹³ Pottery finds within and just outside the bounds are few from the early and late Iron Age, with a predominance being middle Iron Age pottery.¹⁴ Putting the chronology of the Oram's Arbour material finds alongside that of the nearby St Catherine's Hill, Owslebury and Winnall Down gives a more cohesive view of the Winchester area into which the Belgae arrived.¹⁵

Early Iron Age occupation is evidenced in Oram's Arbour and Owslebury by various pot sherds, hearth, or defined circular defined areas and gullies; in Winnall Down by settlements comprising D-shaped enclosures and enough roundhouses to house about forty people; and by an unenclosed settlement St Catherine's Hill and refuse pits, indicating either intermittent or permanent settlement, before the later stage of enclosure.¹⁶

During the early Middle Iron Age settled life continued at Owslebury as evidenced by a banjo enclosure and saucepan pots, but at Oram's Arbour it is only in the late Middle Iron Age in that a large population is suggested. The plain and decorated saucepan pots found there correspond to the building of the sizeable defences in the latter half of the second century BC.¹⁷ The occupation at Winnall Down continued and St Catherine's Hill, now enclosed, became heavily defended. In the wider area of Hampshire there was a move away from the early smaller hillforts to ones with better defence vantage points, such as the one at St Catherine's Hill and at nearby Danebury.¹⁸ These places had greater fortifications and were densely populated, with houses, shrines and granaries to store the surplus accumulated from more intensive farming methods.¹⁹ An 'early form of monoculture' at Danebury may be evidenced by the more specialised feeder farms around it, perhaps with the focus either on

¹² John Collis, 'Oram's Arbour, Winchester: A New Interpretation', in *Enclosing Space, Opening New Ground: Iron Age Studies From Scotland To Mainland Europe*, ed. by Gary Lock, Manuel Fernández-Götz, Olivier Büchsenschütz and Tanja Romankiewicz (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019) pp. 65-86 (p.65)

¹³ Ibid. pp. 65-66.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp.69-84.

¹⁶ Patrick Ottaway and others, 'Winchester In Prehistory', in *Winchester: Swithun's 'City Of Happiness And Good Fortune': An Archaeological Assessment*, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), <<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/j.ctt1s4757t>> [accessed 8th January 2022].

¹⁷ Collis, 'Oram's Arbour, Winchester', p. 83.

¹⁸ Ottaway and others, 'Winchester In Prehistory'.

¹⁹ Christopher A. Snyder, *The Britons*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 18.

crops or livestock, to meet the pressure of supply and demand not just for the inhabitants, but for trade also.²⁰

At Owslebury during the Late Iron Age 'cattle were introduced to the site from a greater variety of geographic areas', some from distances more than seventy kilometres away, not only with the aim to satisfy the need for meat but probably also as 'ploughing animals'.²¹ Life on the south-east coast of Britain became more sophisticated and intensified, with networks becoming more complex. Populations increased both naturally and via new arrivals, such as the Belgae in Hampshire. Having been under Gallo-Belgic influences for a while, technology, decoration styles and rituals had begun to change throughout the south, before spreading to the rest of Britain.²² As this area 'continued to innovate in the second and first centuries BC' influenced by the continent and the greater numbers of people, the formation of tribes and the beginnings of hierarchy took place:

There is no written evidence to corroborate this, and of course large extended families had always been present in the island, but burial and settlement patterns seem to indicate that the entity which anthropologists call the 'simple chiefdom' appeared in most parts of Britain by the second century.²³

As people competed for resources and control in Hampshire there is indication that 'social tensions sometimes boiled over into deadly conflict' and 'raids on rival hill-forts' in the first century.²⁴ The piles of sling shot, the cut marks on bones, the burning of the gate, and the subsequent abandonment of the Danebury hillfort show that life could be volatile.²⁵ A clue to the disturbance of the peace and the changing nature of social order might be found just a short distance away at Bury Hill, near Andover. After a long period of non-use, the hillfort was re-occupied in the first century BC by people who used horses and chariots.²⁶ The horse bones found there were 'ten times higher than at nearby Iron Age sites, suggesting highly specialised activity'.²⁷ That particular activity seems to have been the production of chariots, possibly for the elite.²⁸

²⁰ Peter J. Reynolds, 'Early Life And Farming', in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda J. Green (USA and Canada: Routledge, 1995), pp. 176-209, (p.192).

²¹ C. Minniti and others, 'Widening The Market. Strontium Isotope Analysis On Cattle Teeth From Owslebury (Hampshire, UK) Highlights Changes In Livestock Supply Between The Iron Age And The Roman Period', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 42 (2014) 305-314 (pp. 305-309).

²² Koch, *Celtic Culture*, p. 198.

²³ Snyder, *The Britons*, p. 18.

²⁴ Cunliffe, *Britain Begins*, p. 323.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dave Allen, 'Buried In Time – Royal Blood Bits, Unions, Rings And Pins', *Hampshire Archaeology: Musings From A Hampshire Archaeologist* (2016) <<https://hampshirearchaeology.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/buried-in-time-royal-blood-bits-unions-rings-and-pins/>> [accessed 14th January 2022].

²⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 2 A selection of the harness and chariot fittings from Bury Hill²⁹

Naturally, any form of hierarchy leads to different classes of people, with possessions denoting their status, wealth, or office. There is material support for a Late Iron Age elite in Hampshire:

Social differentiation is generally considered to be a phenomenon of the Late Iron Age, which led on to the 'kingdoms' encountered at the time of the Roman conquest, and central Hampshire provides evidence of such social differentiation in the wealth of imports on the small farming settlements such as Owslebury and the mid-1st century BC gold ornaments in the 'Winchester' treasure.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Collis, 'Oram's Arbour, Winchester', p. 83.

Many of these treasures were imported, for although trade routes had shifted due to the conquest of Gaul, the supply of continental goods did not dry up, instead it increased. Hengistbury Head and Poole Harbour were major points of import and export connected to the Seine region, and the routes between the Thames and Somme regions were still active. The Channel was quickly and easily crossed, and both 'Roman and Gallic merchants took advantage of the now complete Roman control of the overland routes to further exploit the potential of the British markets', gradually changing the market and currency systems themselves.³¹ Large quantities of wine, much loved olive oil, weaponry, some jewellery, and other luxury goods made their way into the country, and raw materials, slaves, cattle, and some agricultural produce made their way out.

Whether the Winchester site itself was part of this changing market scene is uncertain. Some critics do not accept it was large enough or active enough to class as an oppidum during the century previous to Roman interference, believing it to be not much more than semi-permanent place of defence, ritual, and storage, and despite the perfect location for trade not much evidence for that has been recovered there.³² However, there are some unique finds that demonstrate a significant level of activity by the Belgae within Hampshire.



Fig. 3 Map depicting the coin-issuing tribes in Britain³³

³¹ Snyder, *The Britons*, p. 19.

³² Collis, 'Oram's Arbour, Winchester', p. 83)

³³ James O'Brien, 'The Enigmatic Coins of the Celtic Tribes of Britain', *Old Currency Exchange* (2013) <<https://oldcurrencyexchange.com/2015/03/31/the-mystical-coins-of-the-celtic-tribes-of-britain/>> [accessed 14th January 2022].

The first Gallo-Belgic coins appeared in the Thames area in the second century, as a result of gift exchanges rather than currency, then spread along the coast. Eventually coins were minted locally with tribes creating their own. At first copies of Gallo-Belgic coins, then later their own distinguishable gold staters and silver units.³⁴ Whilst more than forty-five thousand 'Celtic' coins have been discovered in Britain, Belgae coins are very rare. For many years it was thought that the Belgae of Hampshire did not mint their own, but now several have been found and it is understood that some uninscribed coins were produced locally by the Belgae. A Hayling Wreath gold quarter stater c.50-30 BC and a Basingstoke Wreath gold quarter c.50-30 BC were found near Danebury; a Danebury Spear silver unit 50-30BC and a Corded Crescents gold quarter stater c. 50-30BC were found in Winchester; and a Moons Horns silver half unit c.50-30 BC was found in Chichester, to name a few.^{35 36} Even though Sir John Evans 'identified the Belgae of Hampshire as possible moneyers' in 1864, it took a long time for corroborating evidence to come to light.³⁷



Fig. 4 A Basingstoke Wreath gold quarter and a Danebury Spear silver unit³⁸

Undoubtedly, Winchester was called *Venta Belgarum* by the Romans, because despite its use by local peoples throughout the earlier centuries, the Belgae were significant in their numbers, organisation, and status by the Late Iron Age in Winchester to eclipse them. How large or permanently established an operation Winchester was or what it was called locally at the time is up for debate. Whether it deserves the descriptor 'oppidum' before AD 43 is uncertain, but the Romans deemed the Belgae to be distinct and dominant enough to warrant using the name. Thus, the Belgae have their place in Hampshire history as opportunists and innovators of the south coast.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Chris Rudd, 'Four Rarities Of A Forgotten Tribe', *Coins Weekly* (2013) <<https://coinsweekly.com/four-rarities-of-a-forgotten-tribe/>> [accessed 8th Jan 2022].

³⁶ Chris Rudd, 'A Little More Life For A Tribe That Died', *Coins Weekly* (2014) <<https://coinsweekly.com/four-rarities-of-a-forgotten-tribe/>> [accessed 8th January 2022].

³⁷ Rudd, 'Four Rarities Of A Forgotten Tribe', (2013).

³⁸ Ibid.

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