

[Cymraeg](#) / English**Key Stage 2: Life in Early Wales and Britain**

Early Christian Wales: Saints and Kings

In **AD 410** the Roman Emperor Honorius sent a message to the people of Britain informing them that they should no longer consider themselves part of the Roman Empire whose armies were now unable to protect them from attack. He advised them to look to their own defences. This message came after a lengthy period of unrest during the late fourth century during which there had been a number of major barbarian attacks on the province of Britain and on other parts of the Roman Empire. During this time there had also been attempts to remove Britain from the Empire the most well remembered been led by Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig) who was eventually defeated and killed in AD 388. In the *Mabinogion* Maximus is recorded as being the founder of a number of Welsh royal lineages.

After Britain ceased to be part of the Roman Empire in the early fifth century AD the romanised way of life did not immediately collapse but the centralised administration was weakened with the growth of **new kingdoms** throughout Britain. In Wales these included, among others, the kingdoms of **Gwynedd, Powys, Dyfed and Glywysing**. Over the next few hundred years the borders of the kingdoms remained fluid as power shifted from one to another and new kingdoms, such as **Ceredigion and Brycheiniog**, emerged. The new kingdoms were each ruled by a king chosen from the ruling families.

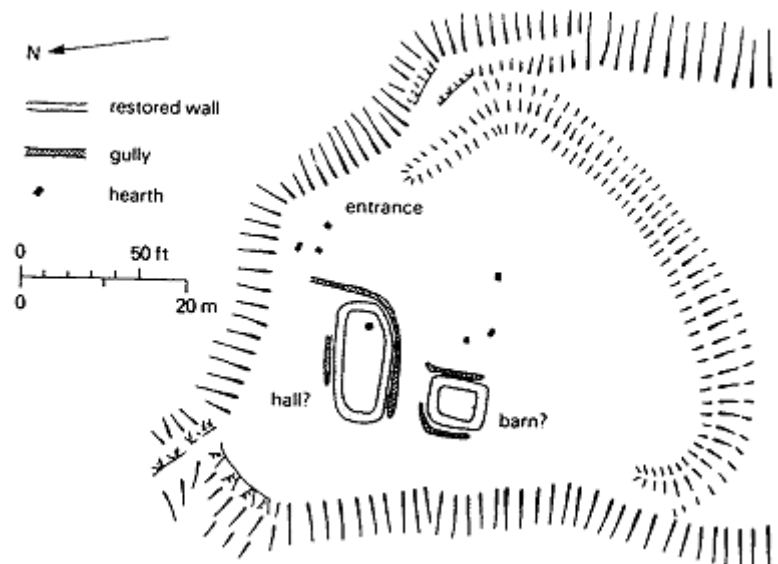


Early Welsh Kingdoms (source: Davies, W. 1982)

The **early Welsh law codes** which **set out details of social ties and obligations** indicate that society was highly stratified. At the top were the ruling families and aristocracy distinguished

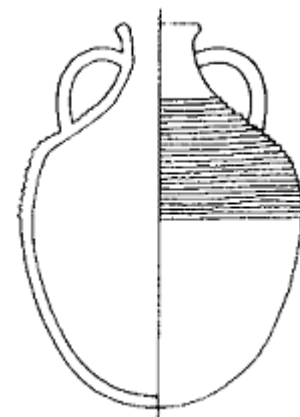
both by their birth and by their wealth in land and goods. Below this were the free men who were farmers, craftsmen, bards and warriors with the bondsmen and slaves forming the lowest strata of society. The bondsmen were tenant farmers who while not slaves were not free to leave their land and service to their lord. The ties between a man and his lord were extremely strong, particularly between warrior and leader. The leader feasted and provided for his warband who in return fought for him to the death. The family provided the other strong bond in a restless warlike society where a person would be expected to know the names and deeds of his ancestors back for at least four, if not six, generations.

The **rulers of the Welsh kingdoms resided in a court or *llys***, a defended settlement which was sometimes placed within an old hillfort as at **Dinas Emrys** which lies below Snowdon. Dinas Emrys has long been associated with Amhrosius (Emrys) recorded in Welsh folklore as an early ruler descended from Roman parentage. Another hillfort which was re-occupied is **Caer Drewyn** in Clwyd. Former Roman forts such as **Brecon Gaer** were also re-occupied. The royal court or *llys* consisted of a collection of dwellings (usually of wood) which housed the royal family, workers, soldiers, craftsmen and their families. The main building was a hall where the ruler and his followers feasted. The buildings were protected by a stone or earth rampart and wooden palisade.

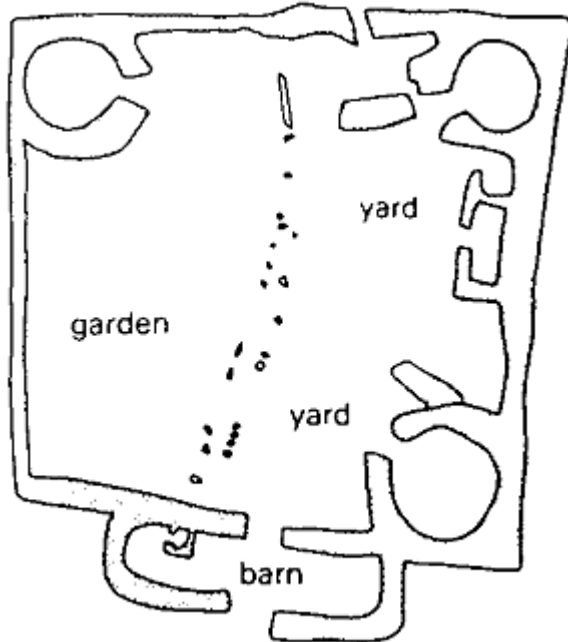


Plan view of Dinas Powys (source: Alcock, L. 1963)

One of the most thoroughly investigated of these early power centres is **Dinas Powys** near Cardiff where a possible wooden hall and barn were excavated. They lay within an enclosure (c60 metres by 50 metres) surrounded by rock-cut ditches and protected by banks of clay and rubble. What makes the site exceptional is the quantity of high class metalwork, jewellery, glass and imported pottery and the quantity of cattle bones recovered indicating that the high status and material wealth of the occupants. **Pottery** found on the site was imported from as far away as Aquitaine (France), north Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. This pottery is associated with the trade in wine. Different types and styles can be dated to between the **fifth and seventh centuries AD**.



We know very little of the **buildings or types of settlements where ordinary people lived**. This is partly because these



Plan of Cefn Graeanog (source: White, R.B. 1978)

did not change much for over 1500 years covering the Iron Age, Roman period and early Middle Ages (up to the Norman Conquest). The other difficulty encountered is that, with the exception of the high class imported pottery, few dateable objects have been found on domestic sites in Wales. It is therefore difficult to know at what date for example, a group of round wooden or stone houses was occupied. During the early Middle Ages the majority of people were farmers living in wooden or stone houses which were circular or rectangular. Sometimes these were set within a stone or wooden enclosure. Other buildings were probably used as barns and byres. At **Cefn Graeanog** in the Lley Peninsula a rectangular, stone-built enclosure contained three circular huts, a garden and a rectangular barn and byre. Excavation

produced evidence of ironworking and farming activities during the period between the third and fifth centuries AD.

The other main types of buildings were **churches and monasteries**. Most references to early churches in Wales suggest that they were built of wood. Some were small buildings made of woven hazel which housed only a hermit others were groups of buildings surrounded by an earthen bank and wooden fence where monks or nuns lived and worked. Later in the period some of the wooden buildings, particularly the churches, were rebuilt in stone. In the language spoken in the period (an early form of Welsh similar to that spoken in Cornwall and northern Britain) the work for **enclosure** was *llan* which often forms the first part of the placename denoting an old religious site. Documented sites include **Llangorse** (near Brecon), **Llangollen** and **Llanelwy** (Clwyd). Few physical remains of such religious centres now survive although the early circular enclosures can be traced in a number of places, as at Meifod (Montgomery).

Although earlier churches and monasteries have rarely survived there are a considerable number of early Christian crosses and memorial stones. Many of the memorial stones are marked with a cross together with a memorial to the dead person written in an abbreviated form of latin. One of these, erected as a memorial to Dervacus, at **Maen Madoc**, Ystradfellte in Brecknock lies next to the old Roman road from Coelbren to Brecon Gaer. Some memorials are written in Ogham a non-alphabetical form of writing based on long and short lines scored across the corner of a stone or piece of wood. This form of writing was devised in Ireland and brought to Wales by Irish settlers.

5/6th Century memorial stone from Trallwng, near Brecon which in Ogham reads "CVNACENNIVI ILVVETO" = THE STONE OF CUNACENNIVI ILVVETO", and in Latin reads "CVNOCENNI FILIV[S]/CVNOGEN HICIACIT" = THE STONE OF CUNOCENNIUS SON OF CUNOGENUS. HE LIES HERE.

(source Nash-Williams, V.E. 1950) *National Museum of Wales*

Contact with Ireland had its origins in the prehistoric period. Trade and contact were maintained throughout the Roman period but from the fifth century settlement of Irish people took place in parts of western Wales. This is reflected in placenames particularly in Dyfed.

Settlers came also from northern Britain to north Wales. They were reputed to have been led by Cunedda who came from the northern kingdom of Gododdin (in the Edinburgh area). They brought with them the earliest "Welsh" poem the **Gododdin** which relates a tale of the warriors of Gododdin who fought and died at a major battle against the Saxons near Catterick (Yorkshire) in the late sixth century.

To the east, Wales was bounded by the kingdom of **Mercia** whose rulers were intermittently at war with the kingdoms of Powys and Brycheiniog. In AD 196 Aethelflaed of Mercia invaded Brycheiniog capturing the queen but no permanent conquest was made. Powys was subject to attacks from Mercia from the seventh century. In the following century the border was demarcated by the building of a great dyke which, although not continuous, ran from the north coast of Clwyd to the south coast near Chepstow. **The dyke** is named after the king who ordered its construction: **Offa of Mercia**.

In the early eleventh century AD the history of the kingdoms of Wales was dramatically altered by the **Norman Conquest**.

Suggested sites to visit:-

There are very few monuments of this period which are still surviving. However some sites with evidence of early medieval settlement were occupied in earlier periods and visits would be worthwhile when combined with the study of other National Curriculum archaeology topics. In southern Powys there are a considerable number of memorial stones some of which are now in Brecknock Museum, Brecon.

Dinas Emrys, Gwynedd (SH 606492).

Caer Drewyn hillfort, Corwen (SJ 087444).

Brecon Gaer Roman fort (SO 00332966).

Maen Madoc memorial stone alongside **Sarn Helen Roman road** (could be combined with visit to **Roman fort and camp at Coelbren** (SN 858107 and SN 963104).

Pillar of Eliseg memorial stone (near Valle Crucis abbey, Llangollen SJ 20454415).

(Leaflets prepared by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust are available for some of these sites. Details of other sites in your area can be obtained by contacting the SMR officer.)

Further reading:-

Howell, R (ed) *Archaeology and the National Curriculum in Wales*. CBA/National Museum of Wales/Cadw.

English Heritage. *Resources 1994* (practical materials for teachers to use the historic environment for any subject).

English Heritage. *The Archaeology Resource Book 1992*.

Thomas, C. 1986. *Celtic Britain*. Thames and Hudson, London.



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