The Roman and the Post-Roman South

The complex of the Indigenous Underworld, and its association with South Wales, was overlaid by the interaction of geography and history throughout the Roman and Post-Roman periods. Unlike the kingdoms of the North, Dyfed, Ystrad Twyi, Gwent, Brycheiniog, Glywissing and the other Southern Welsh kingdoms did not fall under the sway of the warrior dynasties of Coel Hen and the Votadinii (which are further discussed in Chapter 3) during the fifth and sixth century sub-Roman period. Instead, this part of Wales retained its traditional connections with Ireland on one hand, and the plains of England on the other. These are links which, as we have seen, had deep prehistoric roots, even as far back as the Early Stone Age (see p. 26, n. 34, p. 157 n. 218 above). But even into the historic period, the respective experiences of North and South Wales tended to reinforce rather than submerge their cultural differences, as we will now consider.

In the first century AD, following a brief but intense period of resistance during the Claudian conquest, the *Silures* of what is now the south-eastern corner of Wales submitted wholeheartedly to the Roman yoke. The rich, lowland landscape of this area made it conducive to the Roman way of life. The civitas or tribal district of the Silurian people supported a thriving villa economy – as well as a number of fully-developed urban centres at Nidum (Neath), Isca (Caerleon), Gobannium (Abergevenny) and Venta Silurum (Caerwent). It was this latter location, literally meaning 'Marketplace (*venta*) of the Silures' which was to bequeath its name to the later sub-Roman kingdom of *Gwent*.

As the development of urban communities and the villa economy progressed, ties inevitably deepened between Silures and their heavily-Romanised neighbours to the South and the East, just as they became increasingly detached from the semi-independent tribal regions in the mountainous hinterlands to the North and West. Across the Severn from Gwent, spanning the present day counties of Gloucestershire and Somerset was the *civitas* of the *Dobunni*. This area was undoubtedly one of the richest corners of the Romano-British world and home to some of the largest and most sumptuous villa-mansions in the province. The Dobunnic civitas was famous for its heated bath-houses (whence the name of the town of Bath), sacred to the goddess *Sulis*; its cosmopolitan cities of Glevum (Gloucester) and Corinium (Cirencester); and its wealth-producing silver mines in the Mendip hills. It lay at the very heart of the province, intersected by two great Roman roads: the Ermin Way and the Fosse Way.

This brought the Dobunni close to the centre of *Britannia Superior*, the name given to the core of civilian Roman life in the South of the island. It was undoubtedly this world to which the civitas of the Silures would have felt themselves to belong by the end of the Roman era. It was here, in this southeastern corner of Wales, that the most defining expression of the Dark Age Romano-British survival, the scholarly communities of Illtud (c.f. p. 64 above) and Dyfrig (Dubricus), were established in the late fifth century.

Further to the west was territory of the *Demetae*, a native British tribe that was to bequeath its name to the Early Medieval kingdom of Dyfed. Here, there appears to have been rather more continuity with the native past. The relative absence of roads and military fortification has led some scholars to suggest that the Demetae were considered a non-hostile, federate tribe, but one that nonetheless remained outside the mainstream of Roman jurisdiction.[285] Other observers have seen the nascent kernal of a Roman civitas in the Roman remains found at Carmarthen (*Maridunum*), which was sustained by a small but traceable villa economy.[286] However, beyond Carmarthern and its immediate hinterland there is much to suggest that native life continued more or less uninterrupted throughout the Roman period and beyond, as it had done since the Late Iron Age and doubtless many centuries before. This coastal region had always had strong ties with the Gaelic world across the Irish Sea, and there is every sign that the arrival and settlement of the Irish *Déisi* tribe (see p. 381-382 below) did little to upset this rustic, archaic world of localised cattle-chiefs based in their earth-and-ditch hill-top farms.

The stone of Vorteporix, found in the Narberth area of western Carmathenshire epitomises the unusual balance between diversity and stability which defined the identity of the Demetian Welsh from the end of the Roman era onwards. Inscribed bilingually, in both the Latin alphabet of the Western Roman Empire and in *Ogham*, the curious linear alphabet of the Gaelic-speaking world, this engraved monumental rock bears the name of a certain *Vorteporix Protectoris* (evidently identical to the sixth century *Vortipor* addressed by Gildas as the 'Demetian Tyrant'). His name is a title in the British Celtic tongue, simply meaning 'Highest King', but his title *protectoris* was unambiguously Roman. The medieval Harlean genealogies – who recognise this figure as an ancestor of a line of subsequent medieval kings – trace his descent from figures such as Magnus Maximus and the Emperor Constantine. The name of his son, Cincar (Congair) hints at some kind of Irish affiliation, suggesting perhaps a dynastic alliance between Vortiporix and an incoming Irish element. A possible context for this is suggested by the Irish tradition of the *Expulson of the Déisi*, an Old Irish tribal-historical account how a branch of this subject people fled from Meath in the mid-fourth century and settled among the people of Dyfed (p. 381-382). Overall, the picture that emerges is one of a largely harmonious and stable blending of traditions: native British, Roman and Gaelic Irish. The durability of this heterogeneous cultural tradition is testified by the fact that the direct descendants of Vorteporix were still ruling Dyfed four hundred years after his death and, through the person of Elen daughter of Hyfaidd Hen, continued to have a significant presence in the dominant Welsh royal genealogies as late as the Central Middle Ages.

The cessation of Roman authority in Britain was a gradual affair, necessitated not least by the propensity of the Britons themselves to ally with rebellious elements in the Western Empire during the late fourth and early fifth centuries (including Magnus Maximus, Vorteporix's putative ancestor).

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285 Jarret, Michael and Mann, J.C. *'The Tribes of Wales' Welsh History Review* 4, 1968/69, p.166
286 Davies, J. (1993), p. 34

By the time the Romans formerly announced the withdrawl of the legions, it is likely that significant portions of the Romano-British population were already looking to leaders or 'tyrants' of their own. One such leader was the known as *Vortigern* (already alluded to on p.147 above) a British Celtic title simply meaning 'The Overlord'.[287] *Gwrtheyrn Gwrtheneu*, as Vortigern was remembered by the Medieval Welsh, was vilified in the English and the Welsh traditions alike during the medieval period, being held up as a weak, perverted drunk whose mismanagement of the Saxon mercenaries led to revolt and their seizure of power, ultimately resulting in the creation of the founding core of Anglo-Saxon England out of the southern and eastern coastlands of Britannia.

It is hard to know how much to credit such retrospective accounts, but there is no reason to reject the possibility that someone bearing the name or titles of Vortigern may indeed have had at least a nominal authority during the mid-fifth century that extended across significant tracts of the former Roman province, particularly in the South. As such he may be thought of as emblematic of this 'civilian zone', the population of which would have remained noticeably more prosperous and cosmopolitan than the militarized North at the time when the tribal identities of the Medieval Celtic Wales were in their critical, formative phase.

Significantly, the Welsh medieval tradition locates Gwytheyrn's background among the 'high born ones' of *Caer Gloyw* (Gloucester, Romano-British *Glevum*), an area that, as we have seen, was one of the richest and most heavily Romanised areas in the province of Britannia. It was Vortigern who seems also to have been the founder of the native royal houses of southern and eastern Wales: Morgannwg and Powys respectively (though the latter were subsequently to place more emphasis on their northern connections).[287] His name was also remembered in the cantref of *Gwytheyrnion* – located in the southern part of Powys, *rhwng Gwy a Hafren* 'between the Severn and the Wye'. All of this adds up to an impression that following the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons there was a significant overspill of Romano-British population and political power from Gloucestershire and perhaps other parts of the 'civilian zone' into these southern and eastern areas of Wales, apparently under the aegis of Vortigern and his immediate descendants.

The rival power in Early Medieval Wales to these dynasties of the Ancient South were the descendants of the sons of Cunneda – those semi-legendary sub-Roman warlords who were believed to have come southwards from the Hadrian's wall area, and 'driven the Irish' out of North Wales. As we have seen, the descendants of these northern adventurers were to effectively become the Royal Tribe of Wales who, having re-affirmed their identity through the ninth-century warlord Rhodri Mawr, virtually monopolised the sovereignty of North and West Wales (p. 41-42). The southern and eastern lordships, meanwhile, were to remain somewhat removed from this scheme, their kings being drawn from older royal houses with their own tribal traditions and with independent links to the Romano-British past (via figures such as Vortigern and Vorteporix). There was also a significant Gaelic element, especially in the West and South-West. When *Historia Brittonum* referred to 'the Irish', who were opposed by the Sons of Cunedda in the late Roman and Dark Age period, it seems more

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287 From the intensive prefix British vor- 'over' 'above' and *tigernos* 'leader' 'chief'. Gildas, the sixth century cleric, never one to miss an opportunity to disparage the native inheritors of Roman authority, translated these elements as *superbus* tyranus – 'Arrogant Usurper'

likely that 'the Irish' were in fact this rather more complex blend of native, Southern Romano-British and Gaelic elements which was being pushed out of North Wales by these legionary warlords from the militarised zone. The rift between the two cultural traditions was to remain a significant factor in the tribal politics of medieval Wales, and an important underlying theme in the Mabinogi.

The South, according to Gerald of Wales, was *'ruled by a great number of local chieftains, called 'uchelwyr' in Welsh, who were in constant rebellion and hard to control'*[288], making its assimilation and control by the progeny of Rhodri Mawr an ongoing problem in the Central Middle Ages. More than one Welsh king in the eleventh and twelfth centuries met his death among these rebellious *uchelwyr* – who, in keeping perhaps with Gaelic cultural traditions, seemed to have reserved a greater degree of local autonomy than their social counterparts in the North and West (where the Royal Tribe seems to have been more successful in consolidating its authority). This southern identity, as we have seen, had its origins in the historic links with the Gaelic world on one hand, and the Cotswold and Wessex plains of Southern England on the other, these links being perennially reinforced from the Neolithic though to the Post-Roman and Early Medieval periods. These connections, and the variety of cultural influences involved, reinforced various geo-cosmological assumptions inherited from a pan-Celtic past (see p.154-159): associating the South with the Indigenous Underworld. Whatever the precise measure of each of these influences, the important fact was that *this geo-cultural complex would eventually out-grow and become independent of the regional or even the tribal or political signifiers which initially led to its formation.* In short: these experiences and associations passed from geography and history into the timeless plane of myth and esoteric symbolism. It is this dimension of the material, and its treatment by the medieval bardic schools, that now warrants our careful consideration.