

Native Settlement in Wales

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ALTHOUGH THE PRESENT boundaries of Wales delimit a fairly well-defined section of the Highland Zone, they include several regions with very different archaeological characteristics. These differences are recognisable even as far back as the Bronze Age, but they become marked during the Roman period. Over the greater part of the country, however, the remains corresponding to civil occupation at that time are only discoverable by excavation, and very few have in fact been excavated. These are indicated on the map (fig. 1) which also shows roughly the boundaries of the regions characterised by the different types of land use. It will be clear from a consideration of this map that although for the sake of completeness all six regions are discussed here the discussions are for the most part based on extremely slender and inadequate evidence and must be correspondingly brief. The boundaries shown, also, are very far from being precisely established though here the distribution of small finds (as shown on the O.S. map of Roman Britain) gives some guidance.

One region is exceptional. In north-west Wales there are well over a hundred examples of homesteads of distinctive character; they were walled with stone, and their remains have therefore been preserved. They are associated, also, with terraced fields which have resisted destruction even more strongly than the homesteads themselves. Further, sufficient sites have been excavated to justify the presumption that the majority, if not all, are of the Roman period.

In this region alone, then, there is a sufficient basis for some generalisation as to the character of rural settlement, but even here there are many uncertainties, particularly as to the origins of this agricultural development.

It should, therefore, be self-evident that throughout what follows almost every statement needs to be qualified by the warning that it is based on inadequate evidence and may be upset by future work.

The six regions will be considered in order from south to north, leaving until last the north-west, where, as noted above, the information is less restricted.

The South-East. This area was fully integrated into the system characteristic of most of the Lowland Zone of Britain, though it would seem that the majority of the farms were unpretentious, the large and luxurious dwellings being relatively few. There is no reason to suppose that land-use in the area showed any exceptional features. There are, however, enough defended sites of pre-Roman character which have produced 1st or 2nd-century pottery¹ to suggest that the *villa* system may have developed fairly late.

There are also a few sites where 3rd or 4th-century remains have been found in pre-Roman forts,² but this need not imply any continuity of tenure, since in a fairly thickly settled area some farms are almost certain to be placed near earlier forts by chance alone. In this region, therefore, there is nothing to suggest the development of a distinctive "native" type of rural settlement.

1 1, Bishopston; 15, High Penard; 17, Castle Ditches, Llancarfan; 18, Llanmelin; 23, Mynydd Bychan; 27, Sudbrook. The numbers refer to the list by Dr. Grace Simpson, in Gardner, W. and Savory, H. N. *Dinorben* (Cardiff 1964) 215-8. This provides a convenient summary of the evidence based on a fresh study of the material.

2 *Ibid.*: 16, Llanblethian; 17, Castle Ditches, Llancarfan; 18, Llanmelin; 27, Sudbrook.

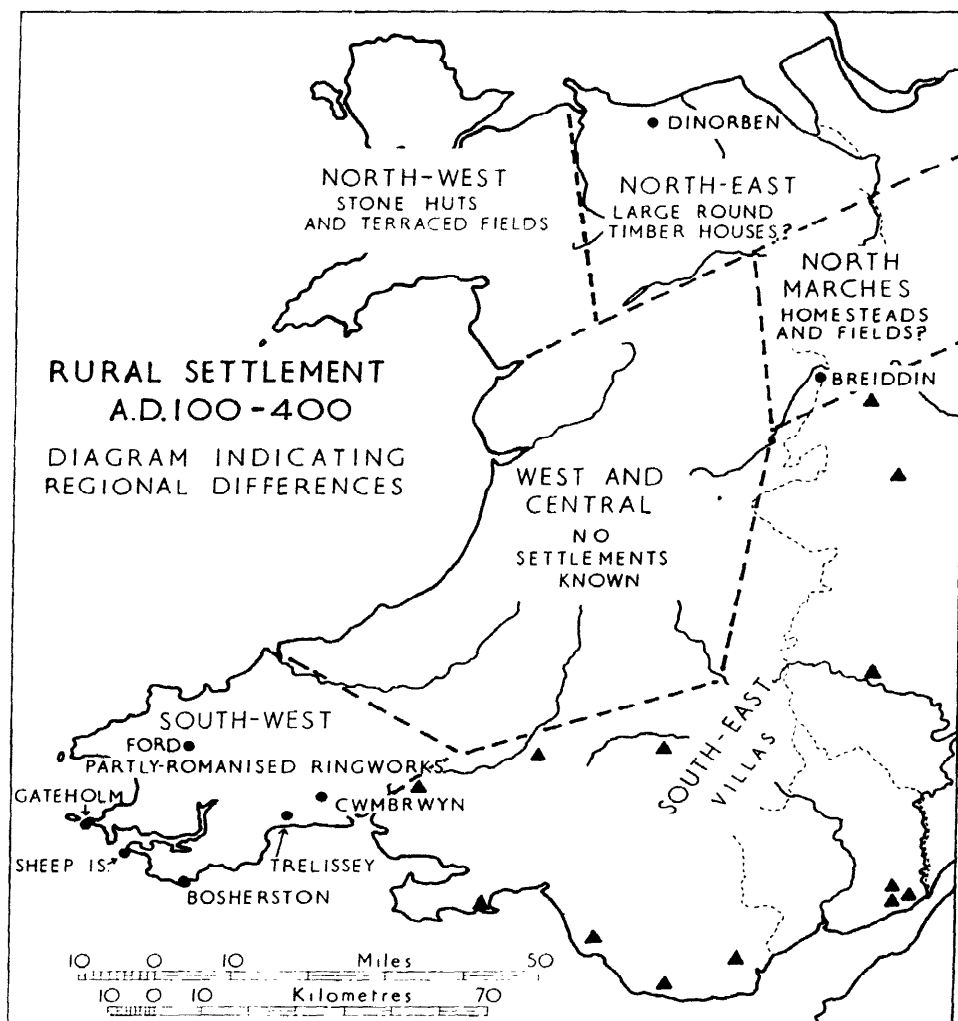


Fig. 1

The South-West. Two sites of the Roman period have been excavated in sufficient detail to give a good idea of their character. Each was superficially a ring-work, but excavation demonstrated the presence of a simple Roman building within the enclosure. At Cwmbwrwn³ the enclosure was roughly trapezoidal with very rounded corners, about 140 ft. across, surrounded by a ditch 8 ft. deep with an accompanying bank, the defences measuring 35 ft. overall; the building was 108 ft. by 25 ft., and there were indications of wooden sheds also. At Trelissey⁴ defences of similar width but with a counterscarp bank protected a circular enclosure 240 ft. in diameter, within which was a building 60 ft. by 27 ft.; excavation at this site was unfortunately interrupted.

³ Ward, J. 'Roman Remains at Cwmbwrwn'. *Arch. Camb.* (1907), 175 ff.

⁴ Thomas, W. G. and Walker, R. F. 'Excavations at Trelissey'. *B.R.C.S.* 18.3 (Nov. 1959) 295 ff.

Both were occupied during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but there is some doubt as to their character: they may have been small official military posts⁵, or farms; and it is uncertain whether the buildings were contemporary with the defences, or were erected within an earlier structure.

Roman pottery of similar date has also been found in three fortified sites⁶, Bosherton, and Crocksydham and Buckspool nearby. None of these seems likely to have contained a building like those at Cwmbrwyn and Trelissey. The earthwork at Bosherton is almost certainly pre-Roman, as it has produced a pin of early type⁷.

There is also a record of a Roman building close to a small earthwork at Ford⁸.

Finally, there is the very remarkable settlement on Gateholm⁹, a tidal islet on the summit of which there are long rows of rectangular buildings; they probably date from the Roman period, at least initially. At Sheep Island, also, there are numerous similar huts which are probably of the same date though not generally set in rows.

Such as they are, then, the remains suggest a mainly non-Roman type of settlement in small defended enclosures, but with Roman influence moving into the region, as indicated by the rectangular huts at Gateholm and Sheep Island, and the stone buildings at Cwmbrwyn and Trelissey. On this interpretation, these two latter sites are farms, and the buildings should be regarded as probably having been Romanizing improvements replacing a more primitive house in the enclosure. In this area, the absence of older relics would not be surprising.

There are ancient field-systems in the west of the region, though they are infrequent and have produced no certain evidence of date. Those at Stackpole Warren (SR985945) not far from the forts of Buckspool and Bosherton, have some resemblance to those in north-west Wales, but those near St. David's (SM730282) seem to be of different character.

West and Central Wales. Between the Teifi and the Dyfi, the land facing Cardigan Bay and extending far back into the mountains seems barren. The apparent absence of civil settlement in the Roman period contrasts strongly with the frequency of hill-forts; it may of course arise merely from inadequate field-work and excavation, but is to some extent confirmed by the scarcity of casual finds. A possible explanation could be the punitive action of the Romans in revenge for the continued resistance of the Ordovices.

The North Marches. A single farm of "native" type, with fields similar to those in the north-west, has been identified and partly excavated close to the Breiddin hill-fort¹⁰. It consisted of a banked and ditched enclosure, D-shaped, of rather more than half an acre, with a slighter outer wall round three quarters of the circumference, enclosing about the same additional area. The occupation seems to have been mainly of the latter half of the Roman period. There was evidence of iron-working, and at least one round wooden hut.

The discovery of two styluses would seem to imply that the inhabitants were literate. The surviving traces of the associated fields cover about 20 acres, but their limits are not clearly defined.

Topography suggests that this site would fall within the canton of the Cornovii¹¹, whose fully Romanized capital at Wroxeter would suggest that villas should be the characteristic type of farm. These, however, are scarce in this region, and it may

⁵ Nash-Williams, V. E., *The Roman Frontier in Wales* (1954), 87, and n. 4.

⁶ Grimes, W. F. 'Romano-British pottery from Crocksydham Camp.' *B.B.C.S.* 5.4 (May 1931), 394. Also G. Simpson, list in *Dinorben*, Nos. 4, 5, and 6.

⁷ Lethbridge, T. C. 'Shell Mounds and Winkle Pins'. *Arch. Camb.* (1928), 177.

⁸ R.C.A.H.M., Pembrokeshire, Nos. 305, 305a.

⁹ Lethbridge, T. C. 'Excavation . . . on Gateholm . . .' *Arch. Camb.* (1930), 366 ff. The site-plan given is very incomplete; the remains are now largely concealed by the rank tussocky grass which covers the site.

¹⁰ O'Neil, B. H. St. J. 'Excavation at Breiddin Hill Camp.' *Arch. Camb.* (1937), 96-7, 107-113.

¹¹ Richmond, I. A. 'The Cornovii', in *Culture and Environment* (ed. Alcock, L. and Foster, I. L.) 251-262, especially 261 on the rarity of villas.

well be that more homesteads of the type found at Breiddin await discovery.

The North-East. Here again a single excavated site is the only clue to the nature of rural settlement. Soon after the middle of the 3rd century, a prosperous landowner set up his establishment in the derelict fortress of Dinorben¹². The organisation seems to have been that associated with villas, the main part of the work being done by a force of labourers. The owner's house, however, was purely "native" in character, being a circular building 65 ft. in diameter.

There are no field-systems recorded in this area, and it is impossible to say whether this large round house was an isolated freak or was characteristic. There is one very large hut-platform at Moel Fenlli, among others of more normal size, but its date is unknown; Roman coins have been found in the fort.

The North-West (Fig. 2). It is a relief to turn to the relatively plentiful evidence in this last region, although many uncertainties remain. Much attention has recently been given to these structures¹³, so there is no need here for a minute discussion of points of detail or for a consideration of any but the most characteristic types of hut group; the remainder, though individually interesting, are numerically unimportant, and their omission does not falsify the general picture.

The essential characteristic of land use in the region is the association of stone-built dwellings with strongly terraced fields. The huts are usually grouped into an enclosure, forming an "Enclosed Homestead" representing a single farm. There are, however, some settlements, apparently of the same date and general culture, where the huts are scattered among the fields, and occasional isolated huts occur. Some enclosed homesteads, also, are found without associated field-systems, though they are of similar types to those which stand among the early fields.

Taking all these sites into account, but neglecting the isolated huts, there appear to be about 28 known in Anglesey, 135 in Caernarvonshire, and 18 or 20 in Merioneth¹⁴.

At the same time, occupation seems to have continued or to have been resumed in three or four hillforts¹⁵; if Tre'r Ceiri is typical, these were much more intensively occupied than in the preceding Iron Age¹⁶.

The amount of information justifies an attempt at a very rough estimate of the population: allowing 10 to each hut-group and on the evidence from Tre'r Ceiri 500 to each hill-fort, this gives a total of about 4000, fairly evenly divided between the forts and the farms. This of course, is no more than an indication of the order of magnitude, but even so it is of some interest. The Roman fort at Segontium probably contained as garrison a cohort 500 strong¹⁷.

The homesteads can be divided into several types, as discussed below, but the system of farming seems to have been essentially the same for all. The farm itself was the house of a single family group-though there may have been a few unrelated labourers also, perhaps living in the isolated huts which sometimes occur among the fields. The main homestead usually stood within a block of arable, which was divided up into small squarish terraced fields of various sizes, but the fields belonging to a particular farm seem to have formed a single group round it¹⁸, not to have been intermingled with

12 *Dinorben* 68-70. Dr.Savory's interpretation of the site carries conviction, and is followed here; but it would be a tenable hypothesis to regard the large circular building as a temple.

13 R.C.A.H.M. Caernarvonshire (III), *xxvii-cxlii,v.* for detailed discussion of the evidence and for full references to the pioneer work of W.J. Hemp, C. Gresham and W.E. Griffiths. See also Gresham, C. 'Interpretation of Settlement Patterns in N.W. Wales' in *Culture and Environment*, 266-70, which appeared shortly after the Inventory had gone to press.

14 See R.C.A.H.M. *Anglesey and Caernarvonshire Inventories passim* for full details of sites in those counties. Those shown for Merioneth are taken from the map accompanying Mr. Gresham's paper (see n. 13) supplemented by information for which the writer is indebted to Mr. W.E. Griffiths. Sites referred to in the remainder of this account are described briefly in an appendix, pp. 37-8.

15 2, Braich-y-dinaas; 11, Din Silwy; 28, Tre'r Ceiri (G. Simpson in *Dinorben* as n.1, p.2); probably also Carn Fadrun, R.C.A.H.M., *Caernarvonshire*, III, p. 70a.

16 R.C.A.H.M. *Caernarvonshire* (III), CIV

17 Nash-Williams, *Roman Frontier*, 107.

18 The evidence justifying this and subsequent statements is discussed in detail in R.C.A.H.M. *Caernarvonshire* (III), as cited.