Iron Age Wales

Gods and War

Introduction

In this book you will be able to explore Iron Age Wales and the world of the Celts through the collections of Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales.

It is designed to pick and choose your themes. Click on the themes below to jump to the chapter:

Art

Celtic Art

Archaeologists call the style of Celtic art in Iron Age Europe '**La Tène**' art. It was different to Roman and Greek art. La Tène art used shapes based on nature. The style was often free-flowing like a river. It can give us clues about how they viewed the world.

A new material used in the Iron Age was a type of glass called **enamel**. It was used to decorate metal objects. I love how colourful enamel makes the objects look.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British bronze object from a horse harness. Found in Maindy Camp, Cwm Parc. The red and yellow shapes are enamel.

Late Iron Age bronze object from a horse harness. Found at Maescar, Powys. The red shapes are enamel.

Late Iron Age or Early Roman Bronze object from a horse harness. Found at Pen-yr-Allt, Felin Fach. The red shapes are enamel.

Late Iron Age or Early Roman Bronze object from a horse harness. Found at Langstone, Newport. The blue shapes are enamel.

Late Iron Age bronze terret with red enamel. Found at Lesser Garth, Pen-tyrch. A terret was a ring on the front of a chariot. The reins would pass through it to keep them straight.

Late Iron Age bronze object from a horse harness. Found at Alltwen, Neath. The red marks are from the enamel.

Spirals

Spiral symbols are a very common design in Celtic art. The **triskele** is found on many Iron Age objects. The triskele is made up of three spirals.

We don't know what the three spirals mean. Possible meanings might be:

- **Birth, Life, Death**

- The **Living,** the **Dead,** the **Gods**

- **Earth, Fire, Water**

- **Three Gods**

What do you think they mean?

Iron Age shield boss with triskele symbol. Found in Tal-y-Llyn, Gwynedd.

Iron Age bronze strainer with triskele symbol. Found at Langstone, Newport.

Iron Age bronze plaque with triskele symbol. Found at Moel Hiraddug hillfort, Denbighshire.

Iron Age bronze plaque with triskele symbol. Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Iron Age bronze plaques with spiral symbols. Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Animals in Art

In the late Iron Age animals in art were more common. Nature was important to people at the time. Some animals gave food. Cattle such as **ox** and **cows** were very important farm animals that provided meat and milk. **Bees** made honey, and **boars** provided meat. **Horses** were important to warriors who would ride them into battle.

Can you think of any other reasons why we decorated objects with animals?

Iron Age bronze boar figurine. Found at Gaer Fawr, Welshpool. It may have been the crest of a helmet.

Late Iron Age bronze horse figurine. Found at Penwtyn-mawr, Newbridge.

Late Iron Age bronze bowl handle with red enamel decoration. Found at Cwm Beudy Mawr, Gwynedd. The animal head is possibly a cat.

Iron Age iron firedog. Found at Capel Garmon. The decoration may be a bulls head.

Late Iron Age bronze bee with red enamel. Found at Langstone, Newport. The bee was part of the handle on a bronze bowl.

Faces in Art

Two late Iron Age brass plaques have human heads as decoration. The plaques are from two shields. Each plaque had two faces on opposite ends. We do not know who's heads they are meant to be.

Is it possible they are showing a god or gods?

Late Iron Age brass plaques.
Found at Tal-y-llyn, Gwynedd.

Religion

Druids

Druids were very important people. They were the Iron Age version of a **priest**, **doctor**, **judge**, and **politician**. People believed druids could talk to the spirits and gods. The Romans said that druids **sacrificed animals** and **humans** in sacred woods. The Romans thought druids were dangerous as they were important in organising war.

Do you think the Romans were telling the truth about druids?

My name is Alwyn and I'm a druid. The Roman writer Pliny called us magicians. He described what he knew about us: Mistletoe was a very sacred plant to us. We wore white robes and cut mistletoe with a golden sickle. The mistletoe was used to make a potion.

Gifts to the Gods

In the Bronze Age and Iron Age valuable metal objects were put into water and left there. Archaeologists think these objects were **gifts to the gods**. People may have believed water was a gateway to another world where the gods or spirits were.

When we offer gifts to the gods we ask them for something. Sometimes we ask for a good harvest. Sometimes we ask for our tribe to win a battle. Do you ever put a metal object into water and ask for something?

Giving gifts to the gods in the late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age in Llyn Fawr, Cynon Valley.

Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age bronze and iron objects found in Llyn Fawr, Cynon Valley.


Bronze and Iron objects put into Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. Archaeologists think objects were put into the lake for the last 300 years of the Iron Age.

Magical Reflections

Iron Age mirrors were important and valuable objects. When mirrors were buried they were buried carefully in leather bags to protect them.

Mirrors may have been religious objects. Just like water, mirrors show reflections. Iron Age people may have believed that reflections showed another world. They may have used mirrors to talk to the gods or spirits.

Polished Bronze Sheet
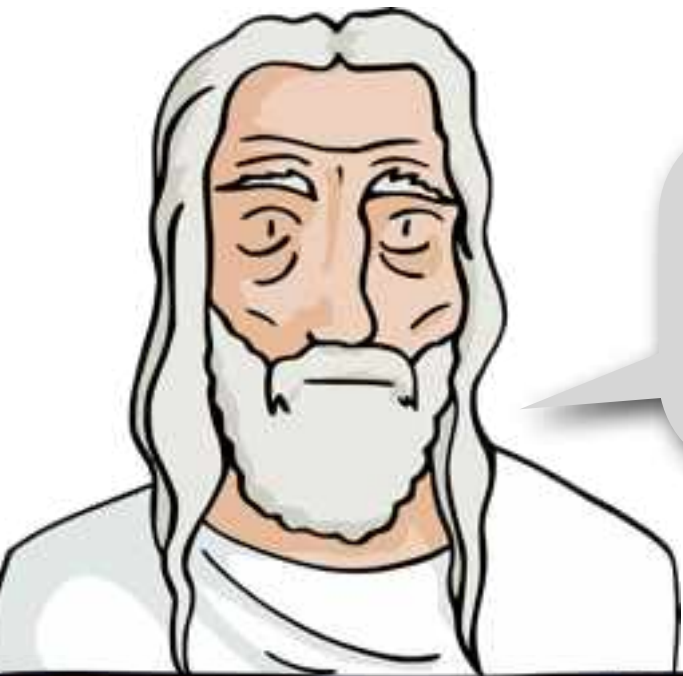
I protect my mirror to make sure it is safe, Only the most important people can look into it.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British bronze mirror. Found near Brecon Gaer Roman fort.

Sacred Animals

In the late Iron Age, Julius Caesar said that Britons did not eat **chickens**, **hare** or **goose** as it was against their religion.

The Roman writer, Dio, said Britons used hares to get messages from the gods.

Hello my name is Boudicca. Dio said that before I fought the Romans I released a hare. The way it ran told me we were going to win. I thanked Andraste, the goddess of war for her help.

Are there any modern religions that have sacred animals?

Can you think of any religions that do not allow eating some meats?

Graves

Not many Iron Age graves have been found in Wales. The condition of soil in many parts of Wales means that skeletons dissolve away after a long time. Without evidence, Archaeologists can not be sure what happened to most people's bodies after they died.

The Iron Age graves that are found often have valuable objects in them. Archaeologists call these objects **grave goods**. The people buried with valuable objects were important.
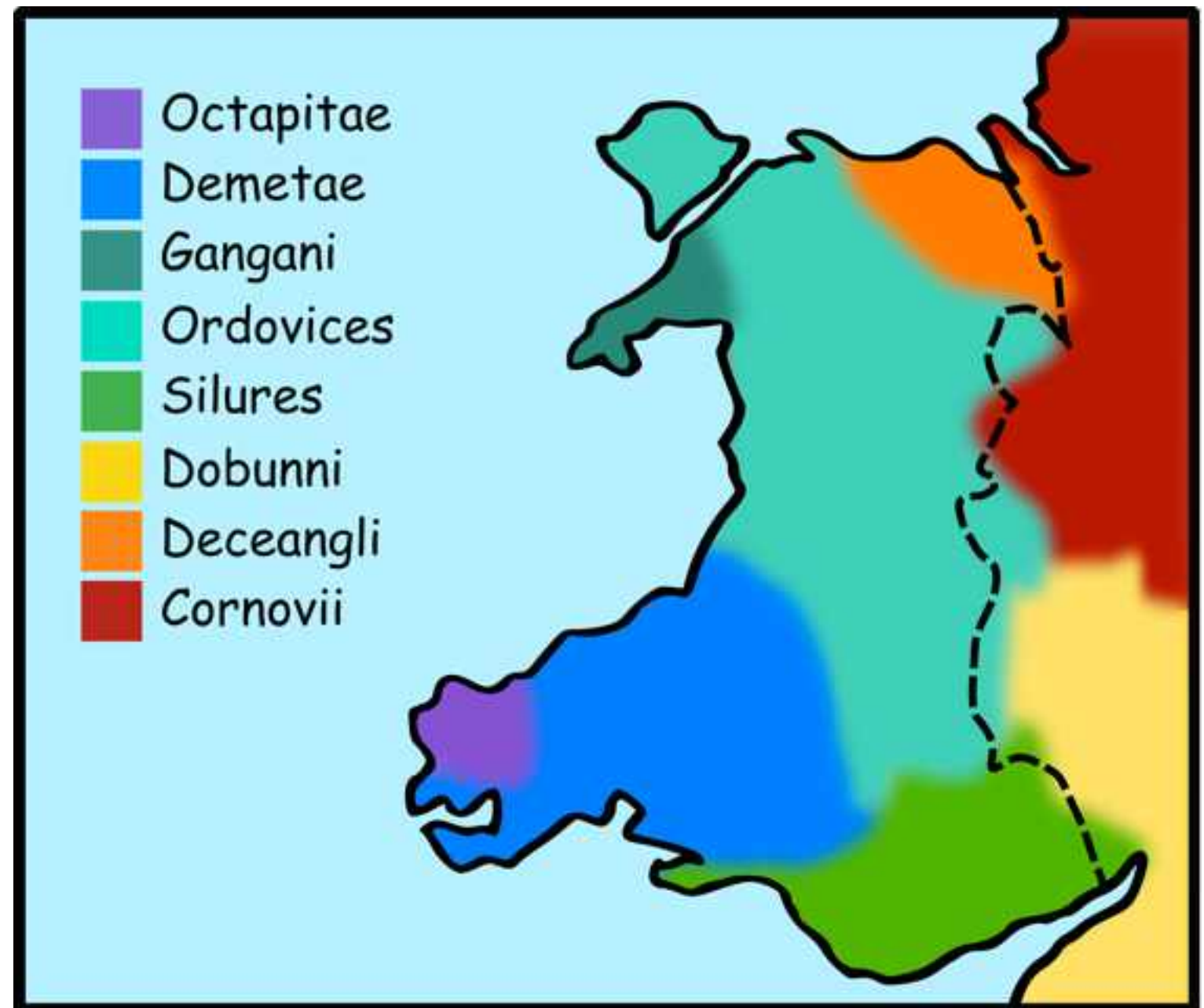
The grave goods tell us about the life of the person in the grave. Iron Age people may have believed these objects could be used in an **afterlife**.

Replica of what an Iron Age warrior's grave may look if it was found by an archaeologist.

Tribes

Octapitae
Demetae
Gangani
Ordovices
Silures
Dobunni
Deceangli
Cornovii

Tribes and Leaders

There was no country of Wales in the Iron Age. People living in Britain were split into groups called tribes. In the late Iron Age the Romans tell us about kings and queens of some tribes.

However the Romans do not name any leaders in Wales. It is possible that the tribes in Wales had several leaders instead of one king or queen.


Late Iron Age gold coin found near Cwmbran. It was made by the Dobunni tribe but found in Silures land. It has the name 'Anted' stamped on it. Antedios was the king of the Dobunni. The image is a three tailed horse, chariot wheel, moon, and stars.

Tribes

Written evidence for tribes in Britain comes from the Romans. The main three writers were Tacitus, Ptolemy and Dio. They only tell us about the tribes at the end of the Iron Age.

Do you think you can trust what the Romans said about the tribes in Britain?
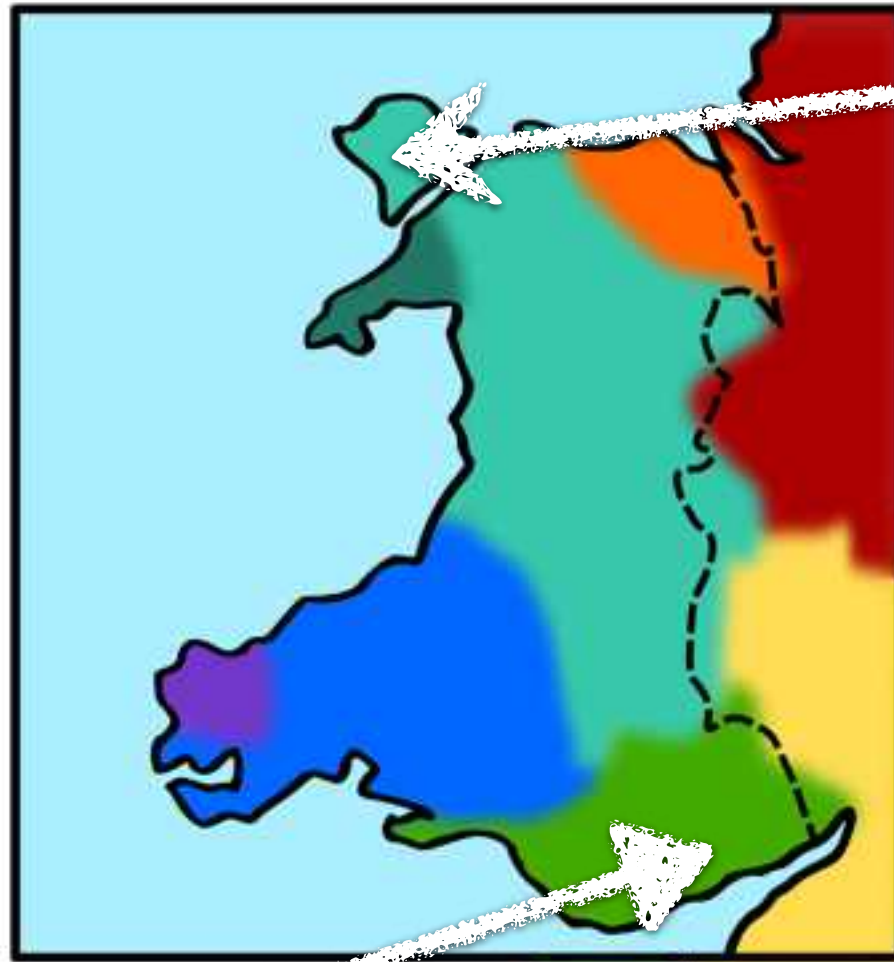
Mona

This was the name for Anglesey. 'Mona' means 'mountain'. Anglesey was an important place for the Druids. Tacitus described the battle between the Druids and the Romans in the year AD 60. After winning, the Romans destroyed the Druids' sacred woods.

Silures

Tacitus thought the Silures came from Spain because they had dark skin and black curly hair.

Tacitus said the Silures were fierce warriors and describes how difficult they were to fight. They continued to fight the Romans until they were defeated around AD 74.

Tribes

Gangani

Ptolemy called the Llyn Peninsular the 'promontory of the Gangani'.
We do not know a lot about the Gangani. Ptolemy, wrote about a Gangani tribe in Ireland. So this tribe may be related to them.

Octapitae

The Romans do not mention this tribe. Ptolemy used the place name **OCTAPITARUM PROMONTORIUM**. This was the Roman name for St David's Head.

Some historians and archaeologists use the name Octapitae. This comes from the place name.
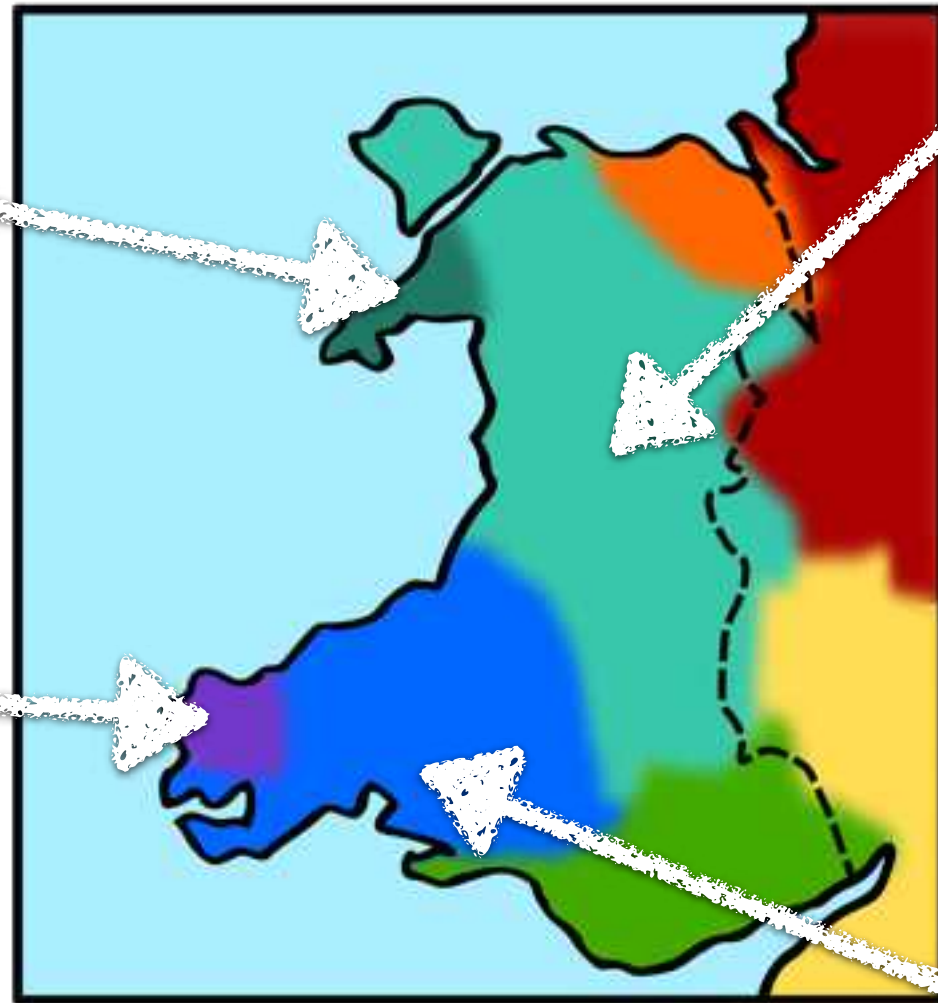
Ordovices

The name Ordovices meant the 'Hammer-fighters'.

They fought alongside Caratacus and the Silures against the Romans in the years AD 48-51. They continued to fight the Romans until they were defeated in AD 78.

Demetae

Tacitus does not write about the Demetae. Ptolemy said their capital was at **MORIDUNUM**. This was the Roman name for Carmarthen. He also mentioned **LUENTINUM** which was the Dolaucothi Gold Mines near Pumsaint.

Tribes

Deceangli

We do not know a lot about this tribe. Pieces of lead with the inscription 'DECEANGL' were found in Chester.

Tacitus described how the Romans defeated the 'Decangos' in the year AD 48. We think this means the Deceangli tribe.
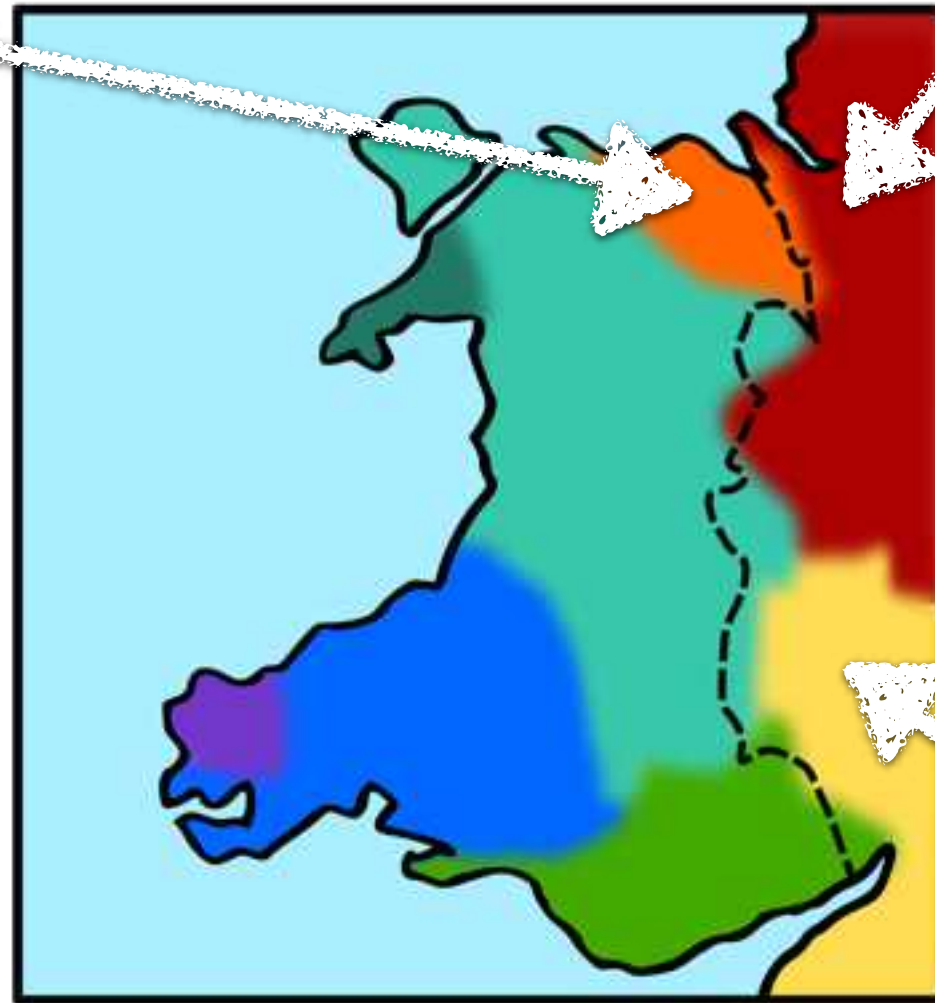
Cornovii

The name comes from the British word 'corn' which means horn. Some historians suggest it might mean they worshipped a horned god.

Ptolemy said their capital was VIROCONIUM CORNOVIORUM. This was the Roman name for Wroxeter.

Dobunni

Dio said that 'Bodunni' accepted Roman rule without a fight.

Ptolemy said their capital was CORINIUM. This was the Roman name for Cirencester.

Some tribes traded with each other but not all of them got along. Some tribes were enemies that fought each other for land and power.

Warriors

Warriors

Warriors protected the people in their tribe. Before the Roman invasion they fought against warriors from other tribes.

Warriors were very important people in Iron Age Britain. The objects they used were valuable. A lot of time was put into the decoration of these objects.

Everyone in our tribe gave something to the warriors to thank them for their protection. We gave them food and beer because we were farmers.

Late Iron Age iron sword. Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey. It was bent on purpose to give as a gift to the gods.

Early - Mid Iron Age Iron sword with a bone or antler handle.
Found at Twyn-y-Gaer, Cwmyoy.

Late Iron Age iron dagger.
Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Early Iron Age iron sword.
Found in Llyn Fawr, Cynon Valley.

Late Iron Age iron spearheads.
Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Late Iron Age bronze shield boss found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Close up of Iron Age metal shield pieces. Found in Tal-y-Llyn, Gwynedd.

Iron Age bronze shield boss. Found at Moel Hiraddug hillfort, Denbighshire.

Replica of a possible early Iron Age helmet. Based on bronze pieces found at Ty-tan-y-Foel farm, Cerrigydrudion.
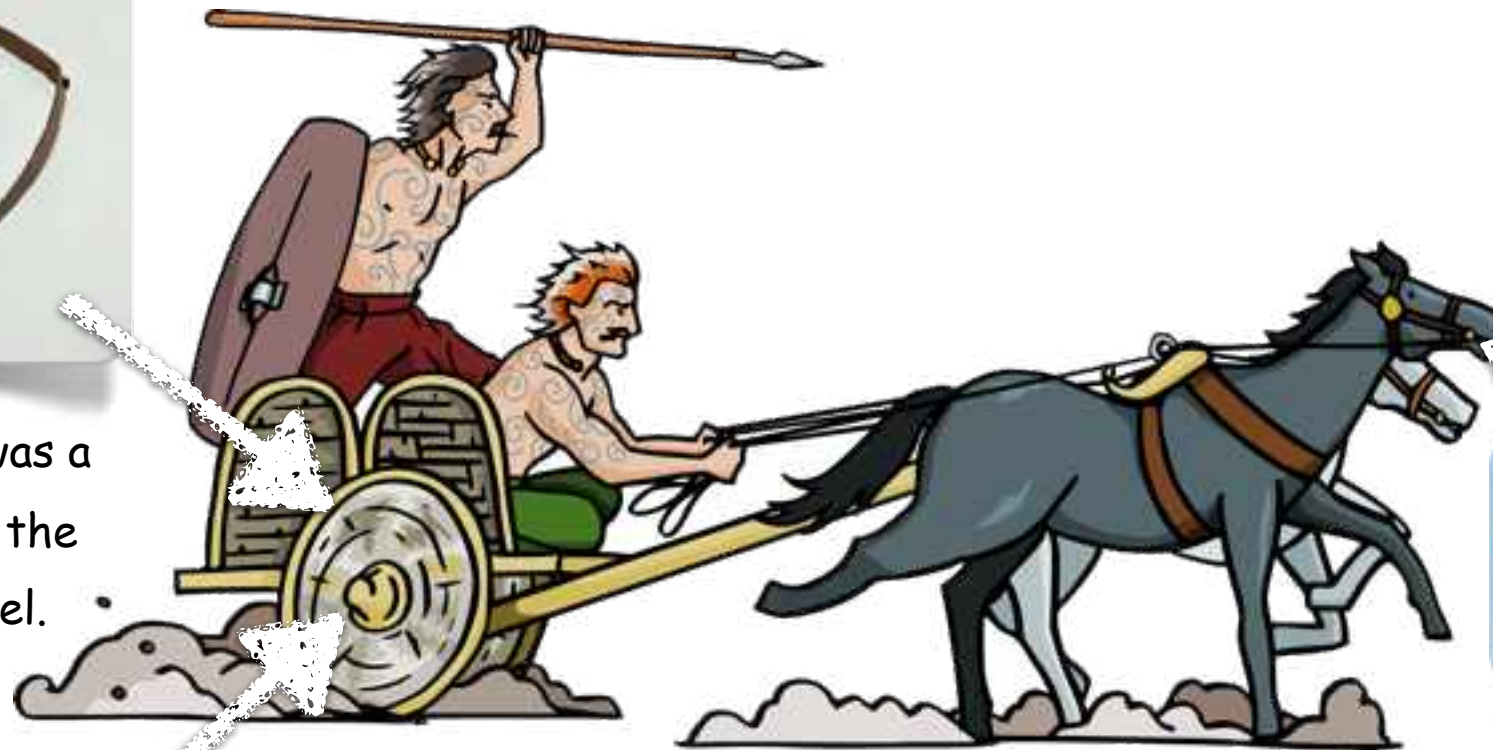

These are the original bronze pieces the replica helmet is based on. Found at Ty-tan-y-Foel farm, Cerrigydrudion.

Chariots

What type of objects do archaeologists find?

Warriors rode around the battlefield making lots of noise and throwing javelins to scare their enemy.

Iron Age iron **tyre**. This was a metal bar that protected the edge of the wooden wheel.

An Iron Age iron **linch pin**. This is put through the end of the axle to hold the wheel onto the chariot.

Late Iron Age bronze and iron **bridle bit**. The horse bites on the bit. The rings are attached to the reins. When the chariot rider pulls the reins left or right it moves the horses head. This controls which way the horses move.
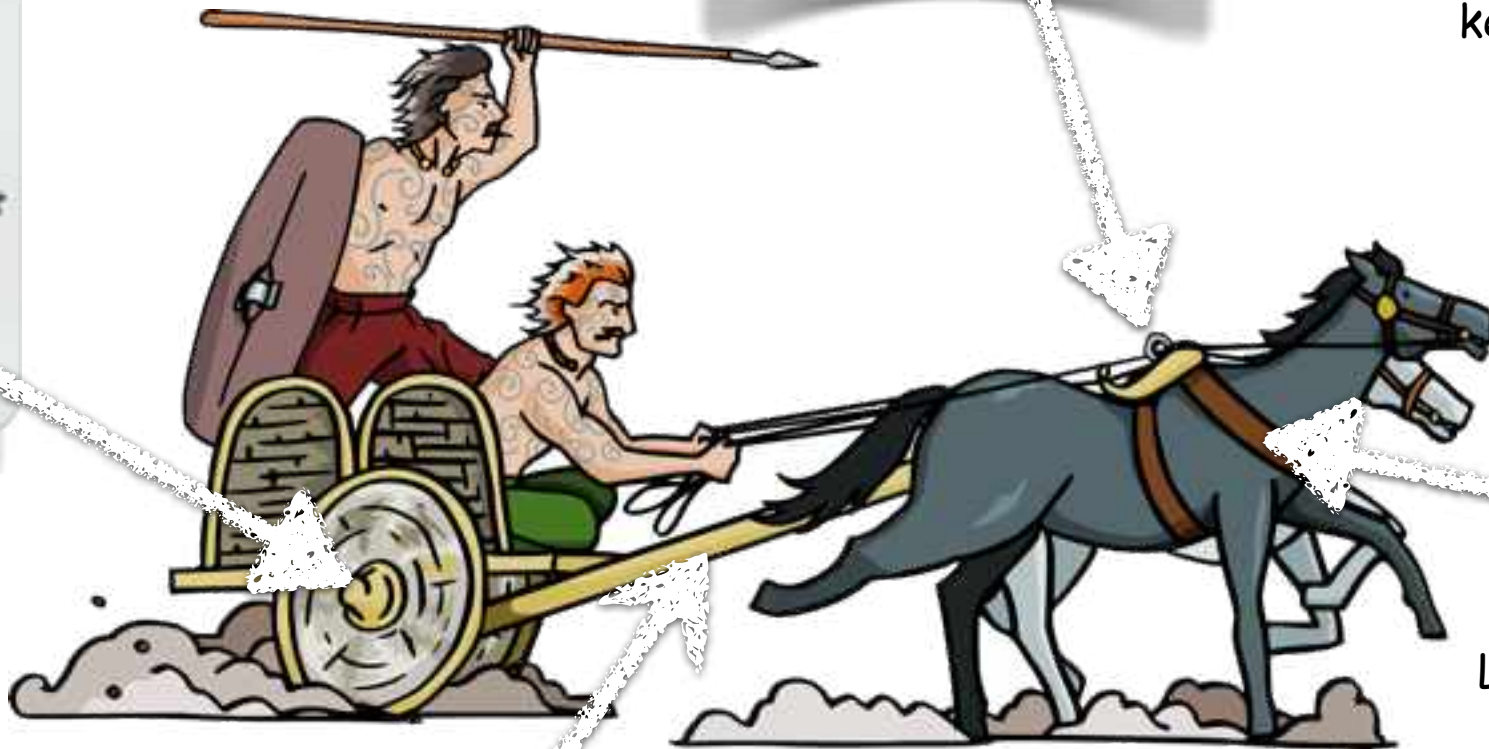
Chariots

What type of objects do archaeologists

Late Iron Age bronze **terret**. A terret was a ring attached to a wooden beam called a **yoke**. The yoke was connected the horses to the draught pole. The reins would pass through a terret to keep them straight.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British metal **axle cap**. The **axle** is the rod that wheels attach to. The axle cap is a decoration on the end of the axle.

Late Iron Age iron and wooden **draught pole**. This pole connects the chariot to the horses. This object is from the top of pole closest to the horses.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British bronze **strap union**. The strap union connected different harness straps together. A harness is the leather strap around a horse.

Horses

Horses were very important to warriors. Some warriors rode on **chariots** into battle. The horses would pull the chariots. Other warriors rode on the back of horses into battle.

Objects used on horses and chariots were often decorated with **enamel**. Enamel was a colourful type of glass.

The warriors get off their chariots to fight. The chariot riders wait for the warriors to come back. Chariots could also be used as portable stages for leaders to command their warriors from.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British bronze strap union and bell. Found in Maindy Camp, Cwm Parc.

Late Iron Age bronze and enamel strap union. Replica on the left and original on the right. Found at Seven Sisters, Neath.

Replica Late Iron Age bronze bridle bit piece. Original was found at Seven Sisters, Neath.

Late Iron Age bronze and enamel terret. Replica on the left and original on the right. Found at Seven Sisters, Neath.

Replica Iron Age chariot. Photo shows the wooden wheel with a linch pin through the axle.

Replica Iron Age chariot. The photo shows terrets on top of the yoke.

Replica Iron Age chariot. The photo shows a draught pole connected to a yoke.
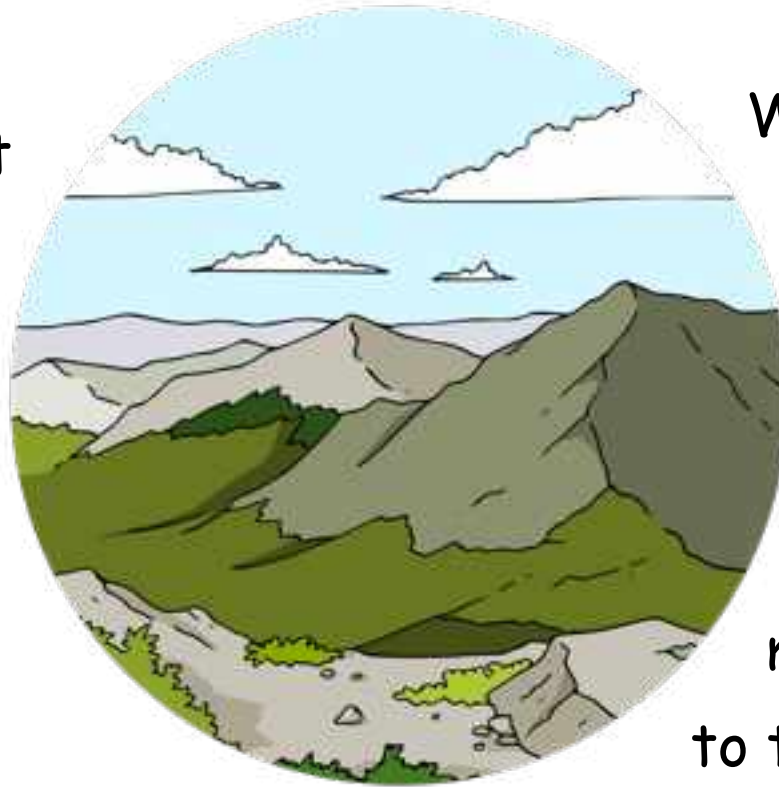

Miniature replica model of an Iron Age chariot

Roman Invasion

Slow Conquest

The Romans began their conquest of Britain in the year **AD 43**. They began their conquest of Wales in **AD 47**. The tribes in Wales did not give up without a fight. It took the Romans until **AD 78** to conquer all of Wales.

Wales has always been a hard place to conquer. When the Romans arrived they didn't just have fierce warriors to fight.

Wales is full of **mountains**. This made it difficult for the Romans to travel quickly through Wales.

British warriors used a style of fighting called **guerrilla warfare**. This involved lots of small attacks instead of one big battle. Often they would attack then run away. The warriors would hide in the mountains and forests.

Everything you know about the Roman invasion was written by the Romans. Do you think you can trust what the Romans said about the invasion?

Timeline of Roman Conquest

Romans begin their conquest of Britain by invading south east Britain. AD 43

AD 40

Caratacus is defeated then captured and sent to Rome.

AD 51

AD 50

Romans build a legionary fortress at Usk.

About AD 55

Revolt of Boudicca

Roman army abandons most of Wales.

AD 60 or 61

AD 60

The Romans defeat the Ordovices and finish the conquest of Wales.

AD 78

AD 70

AD 80

Romans begin conquest of Wales and defeat the Deceangli.

AD 47-48

Silures defeat a legion of Roman soldiers.

AD 52

Romans invade Anglesey and destroy the Druids' sacred woods. AD 60 or 61

The Silures are defeated. Legionary fortress built at Caerleon. AD 73 - 75

Caratacus

Caratacus was the leader of the **Catuvellauni** tribe, from south east Britain. The Roman writer, Dio, said Caratacus was invading other tribes' land. Dio said the Romans were invited to Britain in **AD 43** by the leader of the Atrebates tribe to help fight Caratacus. This gave the Romans an excuse to invade Britain.

Cartatacus lead the British in their fight against the Roman invasion. After losing battles in eastern Britain, Caratcus went to Wales. Between **AD 48** and **51** Caratacus lead the **Silures** and **Ordovices** against the Romans. In **AD 51** they lost a battle against the Romans and Caratacus' family were captured. Caratacus escaped and went to the **Brigantes** tribe, in northern Britain.

He was then captured and given to the Romans by queen **Cartimandua**, queen of the Brigantes.
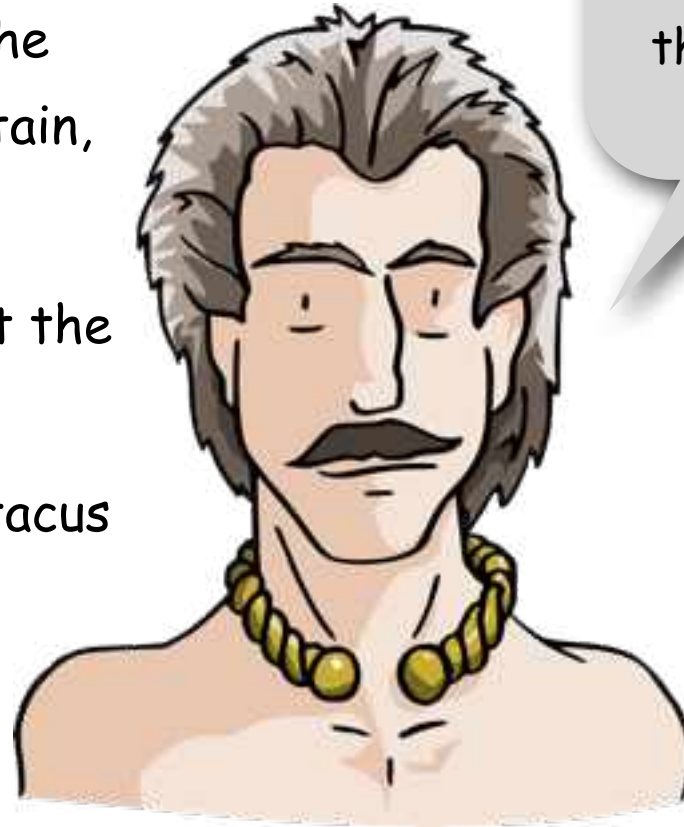
My family and I were taken to Rome as prisoners. After fighting the Romans for 8 years I was famous. We were paraded around Rome and taken to the Emperor. The Roman writer, Tacitus, said I gave such a powerful speech to the Emperor that I convinced him to let us live.

The Fight Continued...

The **Silures** and **Ordovices** carried on fighting the Romans after Caratacus was captured.

The **Silures** even defeated a Roman **legion** in **AD 52**. A legion was a group of about **5,500 legionary soldiers**. A legionary soldier was a Roman citizen.

Tacitus described how the Silures won lots of small battles by using **guerrilla warfare**. They attacked the Romans in woods and bogs. This made it difficult for the Romans to fight as Roman soldiers fought better in big open spaces. Tacitus said the governor of Roman Britain died from the stress of trying to deal with the Silures.

The Romans built a legionary fortress at Usk around AD 55. They also built a fort in Cardiff around this time. This was on Silures land and gave the Romans a base to attack them from.

In AD 52 there was a new governor of Roman Britain who stopped the Silures attacks. Before the Romans could continue their conquest of Wales a revolt started in the **Brigantes** tribe. Roman soldiers went north to deal with the revolt which paused the conquest.

End of the Druids

In **AD 58** a Roman general named **Suetonius Paulinus** became the governor of Roman Britain. Suetonius wanted to show that he was a strong and successful leader so started a new invasion of Wales. Tacitus said that Suetonius had two years of success fighting Welsh tribes.

In **AD 60** or **61** Suetonius decided to attack the island of **Mona**. This was the name for **Anglesey**. Mona was an important place to Britons as it was where the druid's sacred woods were.

Suetonius wanted to destroy the druids because the druids were encouraging the Britons to fight the Roman invasion.

The attack was successful and the Romans destroyed the sacred woods. At the same time the Romans were attacking Mona a revolt was happening in Eastern Britain...

Tacitus described the Roman attack on Mona: There were witch-like women, dressed in black, screaming and shouting at the Romans. We druids raised our hands to heaven and shouted curses. Tacitus wasn't actually there, so I wonder how he knew what happened?

Boudicca

Boudicca was the leader of the **Iceni** tribe, from eastern Britain. In **AD 60** or **61** Boudicca led a revolt against the Romans. The British **destroyed three Roman cities** and **defeated a legion** of Roman soldiers. There is archaeological evidence of the burning of these cities.

Suetonius took his Roman soldiers out of Wales to fight Boudicca. At the final battle, there were more British warriors than Roman soldiers but the Romans won. Tacitus said Boudicca poisoned herself so she couldn't be captured.

The Romans were shocked by Boudicca's revolt and did not try to complete the conquest of Wales until **AD 73**.

My husband was King Prasutagus, king of the Iceni. When he died, he left his land to our daughters and the Roman emperor. The Romans did not want to share the land, so they attacked me and my daughters. I started my revolt to get revenge and throw the Romans out of Britain.

Wales Conquered

In **AD 73** there was a new governor of Roman Britain called **Julius Frontinus**. He restarted the conquest of Wales. Between **AD 73** and **74** he defeated the **Silures** tribe and pushed further into Wales.

In **AD 78** a new governor of Roman Britain called **Agricola** finished the conquest of Wales. He defeated the **Ordovices** then took control of the island of Mona again.

The Romans built forts all over Wales to control the Welsh tribes. The south was controlled by the legionary fortress at Caerleon. The north was controlled by the legionary fortress at Chester.

The Silures were such fierce fighters that the Romans built their legionary fortress on Silures land. The first fortress was built at Usk. This was replaced by the fortress at Caerleon.

Slavery

If you are a **slave** you are **not free** and **belong** to someone else. You have to do everything they say and you are not paid for the work you do.

When the Romans won battles they often **captured** their enemies and sold them as slaves. Thousands of captured Britons were sold as slaves to places all over the Roman Empire.

Before the Romans invaded, some British chieftains had been selling their captured enemies as slaves to the Roman Empire.

Roman stone carving found in the Roman fortress in Caerleon. It shows a captured Briton leaning forward with his hands probably tied behind his back. It's possible this could be a carving of a captured warrior from the Silures tribe.

Late Iron Age or Roman iron slave chain. Found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey.

Reenactors wearing a replica of the slave chain from Llyn Cerrig Bach.

Working with the Romans

Not all Britons fought the Romans. Chieftains in south-east Britain had been trading with the Romans before the invasion. Many tribal leaders made the decision to surrender to the Romans when they invaded. Some even helped the Romans against other tribes.

Once Roman forts were built, towns were built around them. Some Britons moved to these towns to trade with Roman soldiers.

Some Britons joined the Roman **auxiliary** army. This was the army for men who were not Roman citizens. They were sent to another part of the Roman Empire. After 25 years in the army they became Roman citizens.

Romano-British

The Iron Age way of living did not stop as soon as Wales was part of the Roman Empire. Many people in the countryside carried on living in roundhouses throughout the Roman times.

Roman and British art mixed together to make new styles. Temples were built for gods that were a mix of British and Roman, for example the temple to Mars-Ocelus in Caerwent. We call this mixing of Roman and British culture **Romano-British**.

Around AD 120 the Romans gave some control back to the Silures by building a new capital town called **Venta Silurum**. Today it is called Caerwent.

Romano-British bronze cooking pan and sieve found at Coygan Camp, Laugharne, Carmarthenshire. They are Roman style objects decorated with the Celtic triskelle design.

Romano-British bronze ox-head bucket fittings found at Little Orme, Conwy.

Romano-British bronze object from a harness found at Brecon Gaer Roman fort. In the collections at y Gaer Museum.

Late Iron Age or early Romano-British bronze mirror. Found near Brecon Gaer Roman fort.

Late Iron Age or Romano-British wooden tankard with bronze handles. Found at Langstone, Newport.

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The Iron Age at St Fagans

Bryn Eryr - Iron Age Farmstead

Discover the Iron Age. Find out about the daily life of our ancestors, how they built their round houses and how they lived. Take part in activities such as weaving and grinding wheat.

Celtic Warrior Grave

How do we know about our ancestors who lived thousands of years ago? Unlock secrets from the past in this interactive archaeology workshop exploring the grave of an Iron Age warrior.

https://museum.wales/stfagans/learning/ks2/

National Roman Legion Museum

Discover more about life in Wales during Roman times by visiting the National Roman Legion Museum. The museum is in the centre of the Roman fortress at Caerleon!
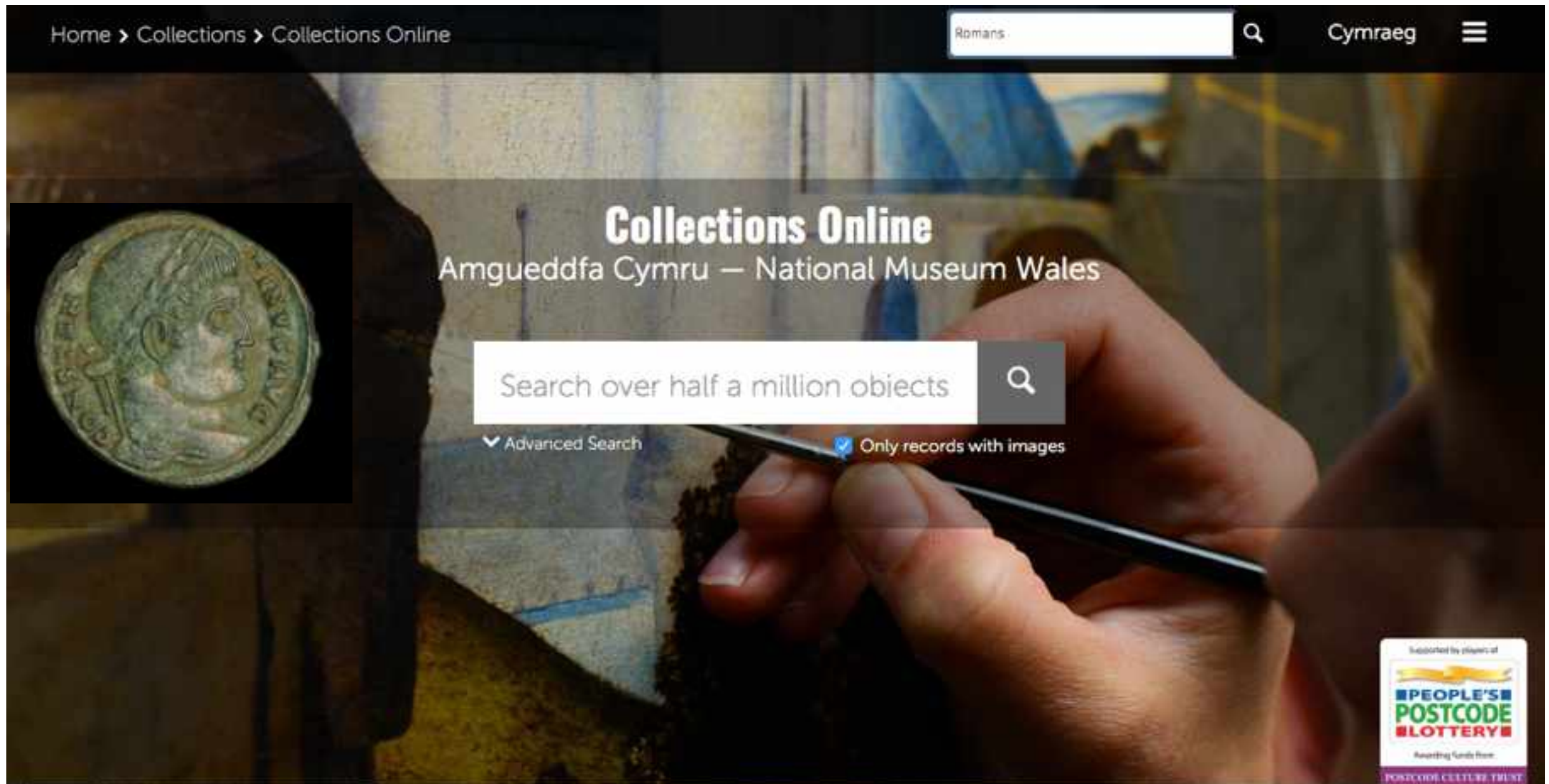
All schools and groups must book in advance, even if they are not booking a workshop.

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