



Iron Age Teachers' Pack Text

BACKGROUND NOTES

THE IRON AGE CELTS

From the building of hillforts and the first use of iron, to tribal resistance and Roman conquest, the Celtic Iron Age in Wales (750BC-AD50) is a fascinating time of human change and development.

We can learn about the customs, beliefs and organisation of early Celtic societies by looking for the remains they left behind. Archaeologists try to fit together the fragments of ancient human evidence, discovered during survey and excavation, or as chance finds. Whether looking at the 'left-overs' from a feast, or the ruins of a settlement, each clue adds to a bigger picture of what it was like to live during the Iron Age.

WHO WERE THE EARLIEST CELTS?

The earliest written references to the Celts were made by the Greek writers Hecataeus and Herodotus, during the sixth and fifth centuries BC (600-400BC). The Greeks named them *Keltoi* or *Galatae*, and to the Romans they were known as the *Celtae* and *Galli* (or Gauls). To those living in the Classical Mediterranean world they were considered as alien and barbarian people who lived north of the Alps.

We do not know what the Celts called themselves. This pre-Christian Celtic world might best be viewed as a loose mosaic of chiefdoms and societies, and not as an empire or nation. Within them a range of related Celtic languages and dialects were spoken.

Soon after 400BC, classical writers record a large-scale migration of Celts from central Europe across the Alps into northern Italy and into eastern Europe. Rome was attacked during the 380sBC. The geographer Strabo recorded a friendly meeting between Celts and Alexander the Great in the Balkans in 335BC, whilst in 279BC the Celts are known to have looted the sacred Greek site at Delphi.

DID THE CELTS WRITE?

A few stone inscriptions survive from Italy and Spain of Iron Age Celts but there are no examples from Britain. Here word of mouth and memory were societies' means of recording events.

There has been a tendency to use Early Medieval texts from Wales and Ireland, for example the Mabinogi, as reflecting life at this time. However these literary sources were written over a thousand years later than the Iron Age. Story-telling remained a means of maintaining folk memory, but society and religions had changed dramatically during this time.

WHAT DID THE ROMANS TELL US ABOUT WALES AND BRITAIN?

With the expansion of the Roman world into western Europe, written histories and geographies record the customs and organisation of the native peoples'. Many of our ideas about the Celts derive from Julius Caesar's accounts of his conquest of Gaul.

The classical writers never referred to the peoples of Britain as either Celts or Gauls, instead they were named in relation to tribes, leaders and the geography of the islands. What we know as Wales today was, according to Roman sources, inhabited by at least four tribal peoples by the time of the invasion (AD43-70): the *Ordovices* (north-west), the *Deceangli* (north-east), the *Demetae* (south-west) and the *Silures* (south-east).

SHOULD WE USE THE TERM 'CELT'S'?

Recently some academics, notably Simon James and John Collis, have challenged the use of the term 'Celtic'. They draw attention to the limited reference by classical writers to the Celts.

During the first Celtic revival in the seventeenth century, the word was used to define the Celtic family of languages. Linguists identify two families of Celtic languages: Q-Celtic or Goidelic (Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx) and P-Celtic or Brythonic (Welsh, Breton and Cornish). In the past, it was believed that each language family represented a wave of Celtic migrants moving from central Europe into Britain and Ireland. This theory has now been superseded. One idea is that the Celtic languages evolved gradually across a large area, rather than rapidly originating from a single source. The Celtic language family is only one of the Indo-European language group, which has evolved since early prehistory.

The idea of a pan-European 'Celtic Society' and belief system prior to Roman conquest, is now seen as over simplistic and inaccurate. Instead the archaeological evidence shows strong regional contrasts, which suggests a mosaic of diverse societies across Europe. Each had its own beliefs and customs. Reading the past in this way celebrates the interpretation of societies as being diverse and dynamic.

CAN WE IDENTIFY THE CELTS THROUGH THEIR ART?

Celtic art, also known as La Tène art, appears as an art-style in Switzerland, Austria, southern Germany and eastern France during the fifth century BC. This style was different from that of the Mediterranean world. Greek and Roman patterns were often borrowed. Most of the decorative pieces that are preserved are high status display objects and warrior equipment. The art appears in stone, metal, pottery, wood and glass. By 200BC the British Isles were developing their own distinctive styles.

Archaeologists studying Celtic art question its meaning. The art has often been used to suggest a pan-European 'Celtic Society' with common religious belief and language. A shared art form need not reflect a single ethnic identity. Celtic art may have been a fashion statement that swept across the continent.

HOW DO ARCHAEOLOGISTS DATE THE CELTIC IRON AGE?

The name 'Iron Age' derives from the discovery and use of a new metal technology: iron. In Wales, the earliest iron objects (750BC) come from the Llyn Fawr, Rhondda Cynon Taf, hoard. They include a sickle, a sword and a spear. The end of the Iron Age in Wales is marked by the arrival of the Romans (AD 43 onwards).

Archaeologists employ a range of dating techniques. By carefully removing soil on ancient sites, layer by layer, keeping records of what they see, it is possible to build up a history of events. By comparing objects such as pottery and metal work, found in the different layers, a sequence of changing styles emerges. Where organic materials survive, samples can be taken to be radiocarbon dated. This gives a third dimension to the dating process. Historical sources, most of which were written by the Romans with their own interpretations and biases, are rare at this time in Wales.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTEFACTS

THE CAPEL GARMON FIREDOG

- A farm worker discovered this artefact in 1852 near Carreg Goedog farm, Capel Garmon, near Llanrwst, Conwy. It was found lying on its side, with a large stone placed at each end and deeply buried in peat.
- Its placing and unbroken state suggests that it was a deliberate deposit. Was this possibly as an offering to one of the Celtic gods or goddesses? There was a strong tradition of votive metalwork deposition within lakes, bogs and rivers in Wales.
- Firedogs, perhaps paired, would have been placed either side of the central hearth within a roundhouse. Their function could have been decorative symbolising the status of the household.
- At either end of the firedog is a representation of an animal's head and neck. It resembles that of a horse or bull and possibly represents a mythical beast.
- The blacksmith who made this firedog was a master craftsperson, highly skilled at shaping and working iron. The skill of the blacksmith was highly respected within the community. Iron was then a new material, first used in Wales at the very beginning of the Iron Age (750BC).
- Iron was a valuable material to Iron Age people, involving much effort and hard work to create. Such is the intricacy of the Capel Garmon firedog that it would have taken over a year to make from the smelting of the iron to the finished piece.
- It is difficult to know how old the firedog is. Its discovery in the nineteenth century denied careful investigation of the burial place. Comparison of this firedog with others found in chieftain burials in south-east England suggests a date in the Late Iron Age (c. 50BC-AD50). These chieftain burials also include wine amphorae, exclusive wheel made pottery and other objects of high status.
- The Capel Garmon firedog is about the same size as the *Dulux dog*. It measures 1060mm in length, 756mm in height and weighs over 9kg.

THE SNOWDON BOWL

- The Snowdon bowl was discovered by chance in 1974, by two research students studying plant biology at the University of Wales, Bangor.
- This fragment of a bronze bowl was found on a scree-slope below Craig Cwm Beudy Mawr, on the north-east side of Snowdon. It is possible that it was originally buried higher up the mountainside.
- This was probably a religious offering rather than an accidental loss. Such a high status object may have been a gift to a god or goddess.
- Interpreting the original use of this bowl is difficult. Other bowls from Britain suggest that they were used for wine drinking or for washing hands during feasts and as part of religious ceremonies.
- Comparison with bronze bowls from rich cremation burials in the south-east of England suggests a Late Iron Age date (c. 0-AD50).
- The design on the handle of the Snowdon bowl looks like an animal's head, sometimes interpreted as a cat. The use of red enamelling (glass) as a decorative technique is characteristic of the late La Tène art-style.
- Recent research by staff at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff has shown that the red colour in this enamel is produced by copper oxide crystals suspended in the glass. This red colour can only be achieved under carefully controlled conditions, showing that Iron Age metal workers were very skilled at their work.
- The Snowdon bowl is about the size of a fruit bowl and weighs 203.4g. It measures 150mm in diameter and is less than 1mm in thickness. The length of the remaining handle is 77mm.

BRONZE MIRROR

- This mirror was discovered in about 1860 at Pont Fadog, near the farm of Llechwedd-du Bach near Harlech, Gwynedd. Also found with the mirror was a tinned bronze platter.
- Bronze mirrors were high value personal items during the Late Iron Age (c.50BC-AD50). They have been found accompanying high status female burials in southern Britain.
- At the time of its discovery no skeleton was recorded and the question of whether the Llechwedd-du finds were found in a woman's grave will remain unanswered.
- It is likely that mirrors held a symbolic and ritual significance. The reflection created by the shiny metal may have been seen as a link with the 'Other world'.
- Often, the reverse sides of these mirrors were carefully engraved with beautiful flowing designs. These are some of the most stunning examples of Late La Tène art, sometimes known as the 'mirror-style'. The design outlines were created with a pair of compasses, whilst some of the voids were emphasised by cross-hatching pattern.
- Although the Llechwedd-du mirror is undecorated, the handle design allows for comparison with well dated examples of the Late Iron Age. But its association with a Roman platter suggests that the two objects were buried during the early decades of Roman occupation in Wales (AD30-75).
- The mirror is similar to a present day hand mirror. The maximum diameter of the mirror plate is 206mm and the maximum length of the mirror is 296mm. The handle is 100mm long and the mirror weighs 419.4g.

CAULDRON FROM LLYN FAWR

- This cauldron was discovered in 1913 buried in peat at the bottom of the lake at Llyn Fawr, Rhigos, Rhondda Cynon Taff.
- The discovery by workmen was made as peat was being removed from the drained lake, in order to deepen it for use as a reservoir.
- The Llyn Fawr hoard includes a number of chisels, sickles and socketed axes, a sword, a spearhead, a razor and horse harness equipment. They date to the beginning of the Iron Age (c.750-600BC).
- Cauldrons were used for cooking food, especially during feasts. They were also regarded as ceremonial possessions, invested with symbolic powers of regeneration and fertility.
- This cauldron is made of bronze hammered out into four flat sheets with a circular base-piece. They are joined with bossed, bronze rivets. The cauldron could be suspended by means of a pair of circular handles.
- These artefacts were buried in a complete, rather than a broken state, and many were items of the highest quality, some of which originated in other parts of Britain and the Continent. Could this material have been a gift to the deities of the 'Other world'? The reflective lake waters may have been seen as a boundary between two worlds.

- The Llyn Fawr hoard is extremely important because it illustrates the cross over between the Bronze and Iron Ages. It is unusual because of the mixed styles of objects that suggest a wide range of origins. Indeed on the British scale the name Llyn Fawr is given to the period of time dating from 750-600BC.
- Some of the earliest iron objects made in Britain are included in this hoard, such as a sickle and a sword. We do not know where the iron was being mined or smelted. A local source of ore is possible.
- The Llyn Fawr cauldron is so big that you can't get your arms around it. It measures 352mm in height and the metal is 1-2mm thick. It weighs 7580g.

TAL-Y-LLYN PLAQUE

- The plaque was found in 1963 on the slopes of Cadair Idris near Tal-y-llyn, Gwynedd by picnickers. The plaque was part of a hoard of tightly bundled metal objects, which had been placed beneath a boulder.
- The hoard also contained fragments from two shields, decorated plates possibly from a ceremonial cart and part of a Roman lock.
- This trapezoid shaped plaque is one of a pair. They are decorated with a design composed of an opposing pair of human faces, linked by a common neck. The faces have staring eyes, and finely combed hair, an image of striking quality. The head was widely venerated by the Celts. Could the Tal-y-llyn plaques represent a deity?
- Perhaps this was a hoard of scrap metal. Or was it a votive offering in response to an advancing Roman army?
- The plaque is made of brass, an alloy of copper and zinc. Brass production was a Roman technology. Objects of brass entered Britain before the Roman invasion and these could be formed into artefacts of Iron Age style.
- The plaque is about the length of a pencil and is very fragile.
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BROOCH

- This brooch was discovered in 1964, during excavations on the Iron Age hillfort of Moel Hiraddug near Dysert in Denbighshire. This work was in response to the quarrying of the hill.
- Moel Hiraddug is a large and complex hillfort occupying a narrow ridge overlooking the mouth of the Vale of Clwyd. It was altered and developed many times between the Early and Late Iron Age. Within the fort evidence of stone and timber roundhouses, together with the foundations of granaries, were discovered.
- The brooch is made from a single piece of bronze and the style is characteristic of the Middle Iron Age (450-350BC).
- The brooch is decorated with a ring and dot design on the bow. The inset is missing but it may have been filled with red coral, from the Mediterranean or white tufa, from north-east Wales. Coral was traded over long distances and was considered a luxury material.
- Brooches were used to fasten and secure items of clothing, such as cloaks. Men and women wore them perhaps for reasons of status.
- The Moel Hiraddug brooch is like a big safety pin. It is 65mm long, 21mm in height and weighs 17.1g

TRAWSFYNYDD TANKARD

- Little is known of the circumstances of the discovery of the Trawsfynydd tankard other than it was discovered in peat near Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd during the early nineteenth century.
- The tankard can be seen today on display at The National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool Museum.
- The tankard was probably used for drinking beer or mead. It belongs to the Late Iron Age (50BC-AD75).
- Due to its burial within peat, the wooden body of the tankard is well preserved. It is made of ten yew staves with a circular wooden base. Strips of bronze secure the staves, and the wood body is covered with a bronze sheet.
- The cast bronze handle includes an S-shaped openwork design. It is attached to the body of the tankard with two pairs of rivets. Each rivet forms the centre of a triskele spiral with a trumpet-shaped end.
- This tankard illustrates the late La Tène style of decoration and regularly appears in books on the Iron Age.
- Its discovery within peat, which was probably a bog during the Iron Age, fits into a long tradition of ritual deposition in Britain, during the Bronze and Iron Ages.
- At the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff examples of similar tankard handles, from the Seven Sisters' hoard, Neath-Port Talbot are on display.

- The tankard is the size of a mug, 180-184mm in diameter and 142mm in height.

GLASS BEADS

- This group of five small glass beads were discovered during archaeological excavations in the 1960s and early 1970s at the Iron Age hillfort of Twyn-y-Gaer, near Abergavenny, Monmouthshire. The largest yellow bead is a chance find from Glanbidno Uchaf, near Llangurig, Powys.
- The glass beads from Twyn-y-Gaer are dated from between the fourth to the first centuries BC. Chemical analysis shows that they were probably made at glass workshops at the Meare Lake Village site in Somerset. The opaque yellow colour in some of the Twyn-y-Gaer beads was created when oxides of the metals antimony, lead and iron were mixed into the glass. These beads were made to a standard size by winding molten rods of glass around an iron rod. Others may have been made in clay moulds.
- The Glanbidno-Uchaf bead is likely to have been an exotic import from the Continent, during the Late Iron Age (c. 200BC-AD0). The glass is coloured with cobalt blue and the spirals were created by trailing thin, molten, white glass rods onto the bead surface.
- Glass was a new and highly valued material at this time. Its main use in Britain was for personal decoration rather than for windows and drinking containers. Beads have been found in female burials from Iron Age Britain and could have been used as necklaces or pendants.
- Blue and yellow glass beads made at Meare have been discovered on Iron Age sites in south Wales. Social and trading links across the Severn Estuary are demonstrated by the distribution of these beads.
- The biggest yellow bead is about the same size as a *Malteser*, whilst the smallest beads are about the size of *Tic-tacs*.

ARTEFACTS FROM LLYN CERRIG BACH

(iron sword, bronze plaque, blacksmith's tongs, chariot tyre, sickle, and gang chain)

- The Llyn Cerrig Bach hoard comprises over a hundred and fifty objects of bronze and iron. They were found at the time of the Second World War during the construction of the RAF airfield at Valley, Anglesey. Workmen discovered these objects whilst digging peat from the site of a former lake edge.
- The collection includes seven swords, six spearheads, fragments of a shield, part of a bronze trumpet, two gang chains, fragments of iron wagon tyres and horse gear. In addition, blacksmith's tools, fragments of two cauldrons, iron bars for trading and animal bones were also found.
- The range and size of the Llyn Cerrig Bach collection is of great importance to our understanding of Iron Age weaponry, metalworking, tools and the development of art-styles. This collection is comparable with the famous discovery of metalwork at La Tène on the edge of Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland.
- The collection of valuable metal objects is interpreted as an offering to the gods or goddesses. Such votive offerings are part of a long tradition in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Wales.

- The Roman historian Tacitus, describes Mona (Anglesey) as a centre of Druidical learning at the time of the Roman conquest (about AD60). The Druids are described as religious leaders, the priestly class of the Celtic Iron Age. Tacitus tells us that their sacred groves were destroyed at the time of the conquest:

At that time, however, Paulinus Suetonius was in charge of Britain. In military science and people's talk, which allows no one to be without envy, he rivalled Corbulo, and was anxious to equal the glorious recovery of Armenia by subduing enemies of the state. For this reason he prepared to attack the island of Mona [Anglesey] which had a large population and provided shelter for fugitives. Flat-bottomed boats were constructed to contend with the shallow water and shifting bottom, and in this way the infantry made the crossing. Then followed the cavalry, making use of fords or swimming beside their horses where the water was deeper.

Along the shore stood the enemy in a close-packed array of armed men interspersed with women dressed like Furies in funeral black, with streaming hair and brandishing torches. Round about were the Druids, their hands raised to heaven, pouring out dire curses. The Roman troops were so struck with dismay at this weird sight that they became rooted to the spot as though their limbs were paralysed and laid themselves open to wounds. Then, bolstered by the encouragements of their commander and urging one another not to be afraid of this mass of fanatical women, they advanced with their standards, cut down all they met, and enveloped them in the flames of their own torches. After this a garrison was imposed on the conquered natives, and the groves devoted to their savage rites cut down; for it was part of their religion to drench their altars with the blood of captives and to consult their gods by means of human entrails.

Tacitus *Annals XIV*, 29-30

- Could Llyn Cerrig Bach have been a major focus of Druidical ritual? The presence of objects such as a trumpet, gang chains and so much military equipment suggests that this is not a site solely of local significance. The large numbers of weapons suggest that objects may have been offered before or after battle.
- Recently the site has been re-assessed involving fieldwork, new illustrations and study of the artefacts, and chemical testing of the metalwork. Rather than representing a single depositional event, it now seems more likely that this was a religious site at which many small deposits were made, at periodic times spanning the period 300BC-AD100.

IRON SWORD

- This sword blade was made by a skilled blacksmith and its shape and style suggest a date of the second or first century BC. Made of iron, it probably once had a pommel of bronze or iron, and a bone or antler handle.
- Analysis of the swords from Llyn Cerrig Bach shows that some were given hardened steel-like surfaces, through a smithing process called carburisation.
- Two of the sword blades have a crescentic shaped stamp at the hilt end of the blade. These may have been the blacksmith's stamp, or of symbolic significance.
- We think this sword was deliberately bent. On the continent there are examples of the 'killing' of weapons (i.e. rendering them useless), before being deposited.
- What remains of the sword is 898mm long, 47mm wide, and 6mm thick. The surviving weight is 626.1g.

CRESCENTIC SHAPED PLAQUE

- This crescentic shaped plaque is one of the most important pieces of decorated metalwork from the British Iron Age.
- The object is made of bronze sheet. An elaborate triskele design was embossed by beating the reverse side of the sheet into a wooden template.
- This three limbed design is characteristic of late La Tène art, of the second and first centuries BC. In this case, the detail resembles the eye and the beak of a fledgling bird. We think that this often repeated design held some kind of symbolic significance.
- The function of the plaque is unknown. The presence of rivet holes indicates that it was attached to a wooden or leather surface. One suggestion is that the plaque was a decorative element at the front of a chariot, another that it was part of a shield face. Alternatively it could have adorned a cult statue placed on a causeway into the lake.
- The crescentic shaped plaque has played a critical role in our understanding of late La Tène art in Britain.
- The crescentic plaque is similar in size to a dinner plate, being 184mm in diameter.

BLACKSMITH'S TONGS

- These short tongs were used by a blacksmith during the Late Iron Age (200BC-AD50).
- Other items used by a blacksmith and found at Llyn Cerrig Bach are a pair of long tongs and iron bars. These bars are the raw iron, which the blacksmith worked into artefacts. The iron bars were used as objects for trade.
- The Llyn Cerrig Bach assemblage makes an important contribution to our understanding of iron smithing techniques. Work in the future may reveal more about the role and use of iron, the skills involved, where the iron came from and how blacksmiths were organised within society.
- The blacksmith's tongs are 211mm in length and weigh 106.2g.

CHARIOT TYRE

- This once circular tyre was forged from a number of iron bars. Its purpose was to protect the rim of a wooden spoked wheel. The craft of the Iron Age wheelwright combined the skills of carpentry and metalworking.
- No wooden wheel-parts survived at Llyn Cerrig Bach. Examples of complete wheels are known from La Tène.
- Careful measurement of the thickness, profiles and size of the tyres and tyre fragments in this hoard has enabled the conclusion to be drawn, that between ten and twenty vehicles including chariots were deposited in the lake. The survival of chariot fittings helped to build an accurate reconstruction of what a Celtic chariot would have looked like. Nave hoops surrounded the central axle piece of the wheel, whilst lynch pins stopped the wheel falling off the chariot axle.
- It is probable that the wheel was regarded as a potent symbol to Iron Age peoples. Wheels may have been linked to notions of time measured in cycles or the wheel may have been a symbol of the sun. Thus daily, lunar, agricultural and life 'cycles' would have, to these people, been imbued with significance.
- The chariot tyre is the size of a bus wheel, 950mm in diameter. It weighs 5280g.

SICKLE

- This curved iron blade was an agricultural tool, used for reaping cereal crops at harvest time. The handle was probably made of wood or bone which did not survive in the peat.
- We believe that over 90% of the Celtic Iron Age population were farmers.
- Surplus foodstuffs would have been taken to seasonal fairs, where they would be bartered for other desirable goods and products.
- It was essential to store seed corn over winter within granaries. Such grain stores may have been under the control of community leaders or chieftains.
- Classical sources described the Druids using a golden sickle to cut mistletoe from oak trees. Sickles may also have been seen as symbolic artefacts.
- The sickle is in the shape of a crescent moon. The length of the handle is 98mm and it weighs 230.2g.

GANG CHAIN (SLAVE CHAIN)

- This iron chain is composed of five sets of neck shackles, joined to each other by series of 'figure of eight' shaped links.
- The gang chain may have been used for slaves, criminals or sacrifices, during the Late Iron Age or Roman conquest period (100BC-AD78).
- The chain was one of a pair found at Llyn Cerrig Bach. It remained so strong, that it was used to drag vehicles out of boggy ground, by the builders of the airfield during the 1940s.
- The Llyn Cerrig Bach gang chains are unique finds in Wales. So far, nearly all examples have been found in south eastern England suggesting that slave trading may have been most common here during the Late Iron Age. The classical writer Strabo, tells us that slaves were exported from Britain to the Roman world in the first century BC.
- Could this discovery at Llyn Cerrig Bach be somehow linked to the religious nature of this locality? Julius Caesar, discussing the Celts in Gaul, records that they gathered up trophies for sacrifice at religious places after victories in battle. Could these chains have been taken from the Romans after conflict on the mainland?
- The chain is 3m long, with a distance of 0.6m separating each neck shackle. It is very heavy and weighs more than 6 bags of sugar (6660g).

WELSH HILLFORTS

- Hillforts are fortified enclosures built of earth, timber or stone and frequently sited on defensible hilltops. They were built from the Late Bronze Age, throughout the Iron Age (1100BC-AD50) and some were also occupied during Romano-British times. They enclose areas of between 0.1 and 80 hectares, although in Wales most are under 2 hectares in area.
- Hillfort defences usually consist of a bank (rampart) made of material dug from an outer ditch. Some hillforts were provided with additional defences. Many hillforts have elaborate and strengthened entrances incorporating impressive gate structures.
- Relatively few hillforts have been the focus of recent and extensive archeological excavations. However, evidence shows that forts contained timber or stone buildings. These include round and rectangular houses, granaries, watchtowers and shrines. Sometimes ponds or water cisterns, pits, and iron or bronze smelting hearths are also found.
- There are over 1000 monuments that could be termed Iron Age hillforts in Wales, although many of the smaller ones are better described as defended farms. Some are visible on the ground as earthworks, whilst others only show up from the air as marks within fields. There is a concentration of large hillforts in the Welsh borders. By contrast, the mountainous interior has few examples. In west Wales, there are many small hillforts or defended farms. In the north-west, the common building material was stone. Here the ramparts remain well preserved.
- Welsh hillforts are extremely varied in shape and location, as well as in size. Promontary forts rely upon natural defence around their perimeter. In land they may be located on steeply sided spurs, whilst on the coasts by sea cliffs. Some hillforts are located on hillslopes, which are clearly poorly suited for defence.
- What roles did hillforts play within Iron Age societies? It's natural to assume that the purpose of the fort was defensive, providing protection from attack during raiding and warfare.
- Some have argued that hillforts were permanently occupied settlements of chieftains with their entourages and skilled craftsmen. They may have controlled the agricultural surpluses generated by the communities that they ruled over. Others have argued that hillforts were occasional and temporary refuges for communities during times of conflict, after which, people returned to their farms in the surrounding area.
- More recently, a number of archaeologists have emphasised the great diversity in hillfort characteristics. They argue for a number of different roles, not merely defensive ones. Many hillforts are sited in poorly defensive locations, others do not seem to have been lived in continuously or intensively. Instead, they may have acted as stock enclosures, agricultural fair grounds and religious centres at certain times of the year. As monuments, they may have been as much about displaying the status and power of different community groups, as they were about defence. A large number of small hillforts in Wales should essentially be seen as single farms occupied by small family groups.

15. PEN DINAS HILLFORT

- Pen Dinas hillfort overlooks the sea from a ridge of high ground between the Rivers Rheidol and Ystwyth, and above the town of Aberystwyth in Ceredigion.
- It is one of the largest and most important hillforts in west Wales, enclosing an area of 3.8 hectares, defined by massive rampart and ditched defences.
- Excavations of the site, between 1933-37, improved our understanding of this complex hillfort. The evidence suggests intermittent occupation during the Iron Age.
- An early fort, enclosing 1.6 hectares, was located on the northern knoll and defended with a timber-reveted earth rampart and a ditch. This was replaced by a similar sized fort on a second knoll to the south, with a stone-reveted rampart. Finally, defences were built around the whole of the ridge and enclosed both earlier forts.
- The excavations revealed the imposing character of the gateways, which were reshaped during three phases of fort defences. Near to one entrance, a substantial rectangular four post structure, possibly once a guard house or granary was found.
- Within the south fort, twelve house platforms recognisable on the surface as depressions, provide evidence for occupation within the fort. Two of these were excavated and suggest that these timber houses were D-shaped rather than circular in plan.
- The discovery of sherds of a decorated jar, with stamped comma-shaped designs below the rim, is of particular interest. The jar was made in the Malvern Hills of Herefordshire and Worcestershire some time between 300-50BC. We can tell its source from the small pieces of rock included in the clay, which only occur here.
- Another find was a small glass bead worn as an item of personal adornment in the fort. It is identical to beads made at Meare Lake Village in Somerset and is further evidence of a long distance contact with this fort.
- Most of the Iron Age settlements in the area around Pen Dinas are much smaller and are enclosed with single banks and ditches. Pen Dinas may have been an important trading centre or home of a local tribal leader. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence, at present, to be confident about its precise character and use.

Y BWLWARCAU HILLFORT

- Y Bwlwarcau hillfort stands on a broad spur of Mynydd Margam, south west of Maesteg, Neath-Port Talbot. This is a type of fort known as a hill-slope fort, because of its non-defensive siting on a slope, which is overlooked by higher ground.
- A central small enclosure, with an area of 0.3 hectares and a single eastern entrance, is defined by a bank and steep ditch. In addition three further widely spaced and concentric lines of ramparts surround the central enclosure, this time enclosing a much larger area of 4.4 hectares.
- This hillfort remains unexcavated, and therefore little is known about its history.
- Non-defensive hillforts with widely spaced concentric ramparts are a characteristic form of south Wales and south-western England. Comparisons with excavated examples suggest that Y Bwlwarcau was occupied during the Middle and Late Iron Ages (400BC – 0AD).
- It has been suggested that this type of hillfort may provide some evidence for a pastoral economy in this region. These widely spaced defences may have acted as protective stock enclosures for cattle.
- The scale of the ramparts and ditches clearly shows that great effort was expended in building these forts. However, within societies where cattle were highly valued, their safety would have been of paramount importance.
- Two smaller, yet similar forts in the vicinity, indicate that this upland and non-forested environment was well occupied during the Iron Age.

TRE'R CEIRI HILLFORT

- Tre'r Ceiri hillfort stands 450 metres above sea on an exposed peak of Yr Eifl on the Llŷn Peninsula in Gwynedd.
- It is one of the best preserved and most densely occupied hillforts in Britain, its stone ramparts surviving in places to near full height and enclosing over 150 visible stone houses.
- Early investigations in 1904 and 1906 involved the clearance of many house interiors and the discovery of a number of important artefacts. Later survey and excavation of the hillfort during the 1950s improved our understanding of the defences and of the building style of the houses here.
- The earliest fort was defined by a stone wall, which surrounded an elongate area of the ridge top. It enclosed an Early Bronze Age cairn, which has been the focus of a recent excavation. The fort was entered through two main entrances, each with approaching trackways. A second outer wall was later built around the western and northern sides of the fort.
- Small oval, terraced enclosures surround the fort and were probably used as stock enclosures and cultivation plots. A spring immediately outside the fort probably provided the water supply for people and animals.
- House styles appear to have changed here through time: the earliest were stone built roundhouses, whilst the latest were roughly rectangular in shape. During an intermediate period, circular houses were internally subdivided with stone walls, creating two or three rooms within a single building.
- The Iron Age fort probably housed 100 people living in about 20 houses. During the Romano-British period, the fort grew into a large village or small town with perhaps as many as 400 inhabitants.
- Most of the finds from this hillfort, including pottery, iron tools, stone spindle-whorls and glass beads, belong to the Romano-British period (AD50-400), showing that it continued as a settlement during the occupation of north-western Wales by the Roman army.
- In one of the houses, a fine and unique gold plated brooch was discovered. Its elaborate decoration is of the late La Tène art-style and it was probably made during the middle of the first century AD. This brooch is displayed in the Roman Archaeology Gallery at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff.

GLOSSARY

Amphorae - Large ceramic vessels/containers used for transporting liquid commodities such as wine, olive oil and fish sauces. Used in seaborn commerce, transporting these desirable Roman goods from the Mediterranean around the Empire and beyond.

Bronze Age - The name given to the period of prehistory, characterised by the earliest bronze metalworkers and their tool and weapon technologies. In Britain it spans the period from c.2300BC - 750BC, immediately preceding the Iron Age. Also the time when people were buried within barrow and cairn monuments and used ritual stone and timber circles (e.g. Stonehenge).

Celts - Constructed ethnic name, deriving from *Keltoi* in Greek and *Celtae* in Latin, given to people who spoke Celtic languages. Commonly also used in relation to people who used 'Celtic' or La Tène art.

Chiefdoms - Used to describe a society that operates on the principle of ranks (i.e. differential social status). Different lineages are graded on a scale of prestige, calculated by how closely related one is to the chief. Chiefdoms generally have permanent ritual and ceremonial centres, and are characterised by local specialisation in crafts.

Deposit - When used in conjunction with votive, a term meaning a body of material carefully or deliberately placed into the ground or below water (often groups of artefacts). In more general terms a deposit is for the archaeologist a unit of stratification. It may be a soil layer, natural or man made, distinguishable by colour, texture and character. Archaeological sites are made up of sequences of deposits, these are a record of activities through time.

Druids - Priestly class in Iron Age Britain and Gaul. Wise men and women, were observers of natural phenomena, moral philosophers, stores of knowledge, administrators of justice and supervisors of sacrifices and religious ceremonies. They played influential roles within Iron Age societies.

Gaul - The Roman term for a province roughly corresponding to modern France. The term *Galli* was used in relation to the Celts of France, the Alpine regions and northern Italy.

Granaries – Grain stores, usually built as rectangular structures and probably raised above the ground as protection from damp and vermin.

Hillforts - Fortified enclosures built of earth, timber or stone, usually situated in an easily defensible situation, frequently a hilltop. Constructed during the Late Bronze Age and throughout the Iron Age.

Hoard - Deliberately buried group of artefacts, often prized possessions, which were not reclaimed. Hoards are a primary source of evidence for the Bronze Age, although important too, during the Iron Age. Interpretations of their burial range from religious reasons, or accumulation of wealth, to burial at times of conflict.

Iron Age - Term used by archaeologists to characterise the period of time after the Bronze Age and before the Romans, when iron was the principal tool and weapon making material. In Britain it lasts from c.750BC - 50 AD. The terms Early, Middle and Late have been used to subdivide this time. The Early Iron Age spans from c.750-400BC, the period which precedes the appearance of La Tène or Celtic art in Britain. The Middle Iron Age is generally viewed to span the fourth and second centuries BC (400 - 150/100 BC), and was the period of currency of the Earlier La Tène art styles. Finally late La Tène art styles are largely confined to the Late Iron Age (150/100BC - 50 AD).

La Tène – This archaeological art form is typical of many parts of Europe and the British Isles, from the fifth century BC onwards. Named after a particularly large discovery of votive metalwork and artefacts in Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

Mabinogi – Reference to a collection of medieval Welsh narratives, occupying a central position in Medieval Welsh literature. They provide insight into life, customs and society in medieval Wales.

Mediterranean World - In geographical and climatic terms the landscape surrounding the Mediterranean Sea used in contrast to the term Temperate Europe, and encompassing the areas occupied by Classical Worlds (Greek and Roman).

Prehistory - Term given by archaeologists to period of time characterised by pre-literate societies. In Britain, this is generally accepted as being before Christ, and the Roman Conquest, although some societies retained an oral tradition for much longer.

Radiocarbon dating – A common method of dating organic material.

Roman conquest – South-east England was invaded in AD 43 by the Romans, however it was not until about AD 47 that they reached the borders of south Wales. Northern parts of Wales were not fully occupied until about AD 78.

Roman occupation - Term given to the continuing cultural control of areas and peoples not necessarily sympathetic to becoming Roman, often through continuing army presence. North Wales remained a frontier zone throughout the Roman period (AD 60-40), whilst south-east Wales became fully Romanised.

Romano-British - The name given to the period when Britain was part of the Roman Empire.

Trapezoid – Quadrilateral, whose sides are not parallel.

Triskele - A symbolic motif consisting of three legs radiating from a common centre. A characteristic motif of La Tène art in Wales, also seen on the continent.

Tufa - Geological name for a soft lime stone, deposits near springs.

Votive - Given as an offering to the gods and goddesses, literally in fulfilment of a vow.

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