

Study Introduction

This investigation into Silurian and later Gwentian identity places emphasis on patterns of long-term cultural continuity and their relationship with what was to become the historic counties of Glamorganshire, Monmouthshire, parts of Brecknockshire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. These county names are utilised for clarity when identifying what was to become ‘a greater’ Gwent after Roman control ended. Collectively, in this study, they are referred to (and as will be discussed) as Siluria or Gwent interchangeably.

Inferences are drawn a variety of sources derived from material culture, other evidence of possible land management strategies, the comments of Classical authors, later medieval documents and secondary interpretations over time to the present.

As will be argued, Gwent appears to be a product of earlier Silurian ethnogenesis and later Celtic influences, Roman occupation and cultural conflation, followed by a transition resulting in independent and occasionally semi-independent entities which functioned successfully for many centuries. Trends emerging from archaeological and textual evidence can be measured and interpreted until its eventual extinction in the thirteenth-century CE with the coming of the Normans. Overall, the evidence suggests long-term cultural continuity.

The chronological span of this survey is vast, and exactitude is problematical. As a consequence, select references to other locales are essential in furthering the story of Siluria and afterwards in what was to become Gwent. For chronological purposes, Siluria’s later Bronze Age can be considered as beginning *circa* BCE 1150 onwards, and is determined by the focus, use and burial of a particular regional style of axe, widely known as the South Welsh or Stogursey Type socketed axe.¹ Its Iron Age can be considered as beginning with the watery depositions at Llyn Fawr (*circa* 650 BCE) and ending with its Romano-British interlude (*circa* CE 48 – *circa* CE 400). Its Middle Age can be measured from the point formal Roman control began to end and *circa* 400 CE serves as a marker for the beginning of this part of the study. This latter period is subdivided into the earlier Middle Age *circa* CE 400–1000 and later Middle Age (*circa* CE 1000–1500).

This approach engages this study with wider ongoing academic debates of Celticity to (i) evaluate and explain earlier historical periods; (ii) continuity or discontinuity before, during and after Rome and (iii) the validity of Welsh law and other Welsh sources when applied as a primary source (especially in the form of multiple estates

and post-Roman Celticity). Each will be considered in Gwentian and wider contexts.

In terms of the former, presenting an explanatory model of Celtic identity in a Silurian and later Gwentian context is difficult as this classification has meant different things within different contexts over an extended period. For this study, the terms Celtic and Celticity are viewed as a signifier for Iron Age peoples who shared some commonalities (although it is clear, they often displayed particular traits). Examples could include being called Celts by others in the historical sources; producing or sharing similar material culture forms; sharing similar cultural or ritual practices; building similar monuments; appearing to have adopted a certain physical appearance; speaking similar languages and who were located outside of the Classical world of Greece and Rome within Europe and the Near East. In what was to become Gwent, some of these characterisations appear to be transmitted forward over time.

This study does this without implying any specific interrelations or connections between any of these elements by using the terms and does so in the absence of any other acceptable alternative model, nor a shared emic (ethnic or other) identity between all communities referred to as Celtic. Therefore, from the perspective of this research, retaining the Celtic description provides a useful conceptual framework to work within. Consequently, this study will argue, in terms of the Silures and Gwent that the most attractive interpretative model is one of a durable insular society, but one, which was influenced by external factors and should be considered on balance as Celtic.

The debate of continuity or discontinuity after Rome and the validity of certain Welsh primary sources which this study attempts to address have received considerable attention. However, the range of blanket explanations which have been produced to account for the profound transformation which occurred are unacceptable within the context of what were quite diverse regions. In a Gwentian context and in the light of the available material culture, the notion of long-term continuity from the Iron Age to the earlier Middle Age and onwards, may be supported in at least five main ways:

1. The evidence indicates that the tribal identity of the Silures people was maintained throughout the Roman interlude despite long-term cultural conflation during the Romano-British period. For example, the Latin name *Venta Silurum* for the *civitas*-capital at Caerwent confirms the tribal name described by the Romans had been retained despite the long and bitter conflict between the local Silures and Romans described by Tacitus.

¹ Figure 1

The Silures

2. The Paulinus inscription recovered from Caerwent offers an indication that the *civitas* should be seen as the centre of the tribal territory which was run by an *ordo* or council, which could pass some local laws or decrees on behalf of all Silures rather than just for the town.
3. Roman gods were twinned with local deities rather than displacing them, as demonstrated by the Mars-Lenus and Mars-Ocelus combinations found in Caerwent and the retention of much older separate Iron Age deities which were represented by the Caerwent stone head and mother goddess figures found at this site.
4. In post-Roman times, there was a regional king who *circa* CE 490–540 gifted land at Caerwent to the Church; his name was Caradoc ap Ynyr. Caradoc or Caradog is the Welsh form of Caratacus, the British prince who had previously led the Silures and other tribes against the Claudian invasion in CE 43 and afterwards. This name was important in early Middle Age history of south-eastern Wales and other Caradocs and other key Welsh personal names are discussed in the text.
5. Finally, multi-period archaeological assemblages from excavated sites such as Thornwell Farm, Chepstow and other sites provide good evidence of cultural continuity from before, during and after the Roman occupation. This evidence may indicate aspects of the unique tribal identity of the Silures that survived into the early medieval period. If this was so, it is possible their laws and customs did so too and were subsequently incorporated into the medieval Welsh law codes.