

Treasure: Uncovering Romans and Celts

In 2012 a hoard of about 70,000 coins was found in a field in Jersey. Jersey has more Armorican or Celtic coins than anywhere else in Europe.

The coins were made about 2,000 years ago – when Julius Caesar and his Roman legions were conquering Gaul and the Channel Islands were changing from a Celtic way of life to a Roman style of living.

This exhibition displays some of the objects found in Gaul, both Celt and Roman and seeks to connect some of the dots between the two cultures and to make some sense of the impact that they both had on the Channel Islands. The aim of the exhibition is to place Jersey in the context of what was happening in the region at the time – this transition from the Celtic to the Gallo-Roman world.



The Celtic World

About 300 BCE, the Channel Islands were part of the Celtic world. Today we know these areas as Brittany and Normandy and the larger islands are Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark. The Romans referred to this region as Armorica and the people as Gauls.

The Armorican Tribes

The closest tribes to the Channel Islands were the Unelli to the east and the Coriosolites to the south.

The Armorican tribes were a Celtic people who 2000 years ago occupied the modern day regions of Brittany and Normandy. Based upon the frequency of coins belonging to the Coriosolites tribe found in Jersey it seems most probable that the island was within this tribal hegemony.

By the time the Romans arrived the region was settled by a number of different tribes whom we know by the names the Romans gave them. The Coriosolites were one of the Armorican or maritime states of Gaul mentioned by Julius Caesar in

Bello Gallico and their tribal capital was Corseul. Neighbouring tribes/states were the Veneti to the southwest, the Osismi to the west and the Rediones to the east.

The Unelli or Veneli occupied the Cotentin peninsula – essentially the modern day department of Manche and their tribal capital was Crociatonum – possibly in the Carentan area. To the east of the Unelli were the Baiocasses, their territory, now known as le Bessin, had its main town at Bayeux. They were a sub-tribe of the Lexovii. To the south of the Unelli, separating them from the land of the Redones was the Abrincatui. Whose main settlement was modern day Avranches.



Celtic Society

Most of the records describing the Celtic world were written by Romans who saw these Celtic people as full of contradictions. They wrote about their warlike practises - raiding, cattle theft, taking heads as war trophies, human sacrifice, and the mysterious group called druids. But as a people they valued poetry and art, and women took an equal part in everyday life.

Celtic tribal structure

King/Queen Royal Family

Warriors Druids

Farmers Craftsmen

Servants

The majority of the Celtic population in the islands were farmers or fishermen although rich burials found in Guernsey show that some elements of the traditional Celtic warrior society were adopted in the island. No similar burials have been found in Jersey although promontory forts like C  tel de Rozel do imply a warrior society and the expectation of being attacked.

The druids were the thinkers of Celtic society and they could be either male or female. During the 20 years it took to become a druid they studied mathematics, natural and political science, history, law and religion.

The Coin Hoard

Jersey is unique in the number of coin hoards that have been found, More Celtic coins have been found in the island than in the rest of the Celtic world put together. Most of the surviving coins belong to the Armorican tribe known to the Romans as the Coriosolites

Why this should be the case is a mystery. The coins tend to date from the 1st century BC - a time when the Celtic and the Roman world were in a violent collision.

It has been estimated that the most recent hoard contains between 50,000 and 70,000 pieces and yet we still do not know why it was hidden. Amongst the theories are:

- It was a war chest to be used to fund the war against Caesar
- It was a gift to the Gods to ensure success
- It is a smugglers hoard, ready to be melted down and the silver metal extracted.

Clash of Cultures

In the middle of the 1st century BC Julius Caesar was leading his Roman legions over the Alps against the peoples of Gaul (modern day France). By 56 BC three Roman legions were attacking the people of Armorica. By 52 BC the Roman conquest was complete and all of Armorica, including the Channel Islands, was part of the Roman World.

We believe that the coin hoards date from this time. If we are right, then they represent a shift in the history of the Channel Islands as they represent for the struggle between an independent Celtic world or a subservient Roman future.

The Roman conquest of Gaul (details taken from Caesar's Gallo Bellico)

57 BC

Caesar defeats the Belgae and sends Crassus to Armorica

56 BC

Quintus Titursius Sabinus leads an expedition against the Armorican tribes. He defeat the Venetii at sea and both the Unelli and Coriosolites on land

55 BC

Caesar crosses the Rhine leading against German tribes and leads his first expedition against Britain

54 BC

Caesar leads a second expedition against Britain

53 BC

Caesar puts down a revolt by Gauls in the area of modern day Belgium

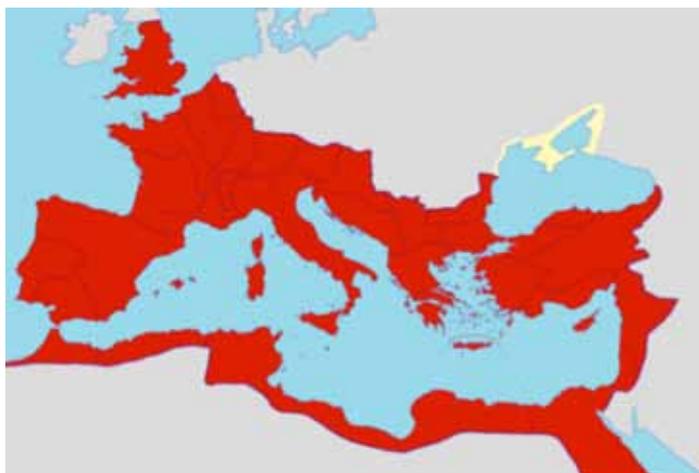
52 BC

Final defeat of the Gaulish confederation, which includes the Coriosolites and the Unelli at Alesia



Becoming Roman

When the Channel Islands became part of the Roman world life initially would have carried on much as it had. Gradually the islanders traditional Celtic/Gaulish way of life changed as more Roman ways were introduced and adopted. We generally refer to this new culture as Gallo-Roman. The islands were no longer on the edge of things, they were part of a large unified empire and trading network.



The Roman Empire around AD 120

Guernsey provides more evidence of this process of Romanisation because St Peter Port developed around its natural deep water harbour into a small town and trading centre, welcoming ships passing through carrying wines and exotic goods from the Mediterranean and grain and furs from the Britain and further north. Jersey remained more of a Celtic backwater because it lacked decent harbours although more evidence is coming to light.

Despite these change the majority of the Gallo-Roman population in the islands would have remained farmers or fishermen and the new wealthy class were the merchants and traders rather than warriors. It was these people who benefited most from the stability of the empire and who were perhaps the most Romanised with the richest living in villas made of stone and roofed with tiles.

The Beginning of the End

After nearly 300 years of a unified Roman empire, attacks from the north saw the first signs of a break up which would lead to regional leaders assuming more power, a greater emphasis on maritime power, and people once again burying their wealth.



The Roman Empires around AD 260

For a short time - AD 360-374 - there was a Gallic Empire (Germania, Britannia, Gaul and for a while Hispania) in the west and a Palmyrene Empire (Syria, Palestine and Egypt) in the east.

From AD 286 to 296 there was a breakaway Britannic empire which was composed of Britain and North West Gaul.

It is about this time that the names of the Channel Islands first appear in documents - it is thought that Alderney was Riduna, Guernsey was Lesia or Lisia and Jersey was Andium.

