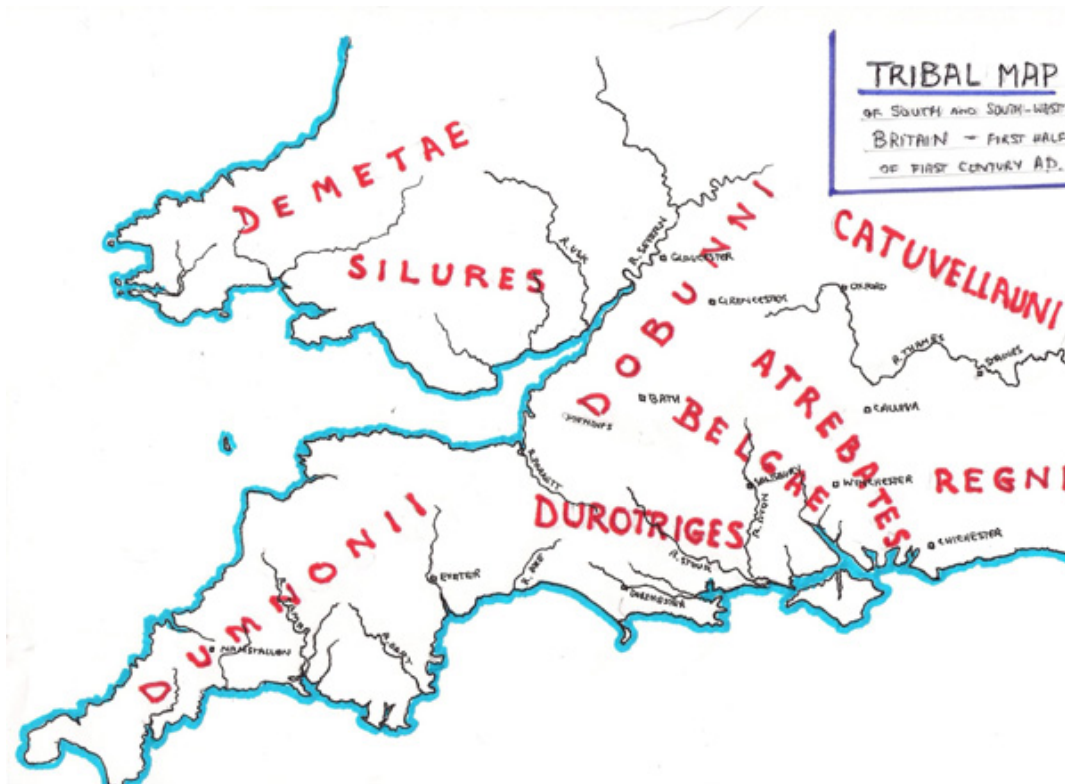


Keith Perryman talked to us on November 23rd 2007 about the Roman Invasion of Dorset. He recently sent us this update

WHO WERE THE SECOND TRIBE ?



One of the more conspicuous unsolved conundrums of the first part of the 1st Century AD concerning southern Britain is the failure even to establish conventional wisdom as to the identity of the second of the two Celtic tribes whom the Emperor Vespasian was said to have subdued during his spell as Legate in command of Legion II Augusta between AD43 (the year when the invasion of Britannia was launched) and AD47 (when he is believed to have returned to Rome to receive the plaudits of an ecstatic Roman populace).

To establish the identity of at least one of the tribes, we have a really helpful piece of written evidence contained in the 'Life of the Emperor Vespasian,' in which his biographer, Suetonius, makes the following clear statement giving us a most useful clue - a translation of the passage reads as follows :

"In Claudius' principate, he was transferred to Britain, and there he came to blows thirty times with the enemy. He reduced two very strong tribes and more than twenty native townships, as well as the Isle of Wight, which lies alongside Britain."

Although the view is not unanimous, it seems to be widely accepted as a result of this wording, that one of the tribes 'reduced' when Vespasian was operating on his own with II Legion, must have been the Durotriges, the large and independently-minded Celtic tribe who occupied modern day Dorset and considerable parts of southern Wiltshire and Somerset.

The reasoning behind this conclusion is that, if Vespasian 'reduced' the Isle of Wight, he and his legion must have been on the south coast, some distance west of Noviomagus (Chichester), which was understood to be their base. That being the case he would have found himself only a relatively few miles from the territory of the Durotriges who were known to be virulently anti-Roman.

It is necessary to recall that the original Roman plan for the invasion of Britannia was the subjection of all the lowlands of south-east England up to a line from Seaton in south-east Devon, to Lincoln and the Humber in the north (which later became the approximate line of the Fosse Way). In these circumstances it seems almost certain that Vespasian was given the task of clearing the south coast by Aulus Plautius, the Commander-in-Chief, thus putting him in the position of having to turn west against the Durotriges and 'reduce' them, so as to anchor the southern extremity of the Seaton - Lincoln line. And there is ample evidence that the Durotriges were in fact invaded.

Thus far, a logical and relatively easy identification of one of 'the two tribes. Is it possible or likely that another tribe was 'reduced' by him prior to his assault on the Durotriges?

There appears to be no doubt that Vespasian and his Legion took part in the earlier, vital, AD43, battles against the larger tribes of the south-east such as the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes. It is said that he and his legion did well in a two-day battle at a river crossing which many believe was on the river Medway near Rochester in Kent. But the 'kudos' for those battles must have belonged to Claudius, who came to Britannia especially to lead his forces in the 'coup-de-grace,' or at the least to the Commander, Aulus Plautius.

At the conclusion of those battles, it is likely that II Legion would have been somewhere in the south-east of England, perhaps in the area of the Thames around Pontes (Staines). It would have been at this stage that Vespasian must have been ordered to march south-west to the coast if he was to take the Isle of Wight. In the course of that march, what tribes would he have been close to ?

Looking at the Tribal Map attached, it can be seen that he would have had to pass through the present day counties of Berkshire and Hampshire which were partly occupied by a pro-Roman tribe called the Atrebates, or through Sussex, the territory of the Regni, also pro-Roman. Indeed, at that time a Roman client king named Cogidubnus was being installed as ruler of the Atrebates. Some way to the north were the large and influential tribe of the Catuvellauni, but they had already been defeated in the earlier battles. Another tribe called the Belgae occupied lands to the west of the Atrebates, but, again, some distance away from Vespasian's line of march. It is, therefore, most unlikely that he would have had any opportunity to attack another tribe before taking on the Durotriges.

So, given that Vespasian, probably after a lengthy struggle, did 'reduce' the Durotriges, we are brought face to face with the very much more difficult question of the identity of the second British tribe which he 'reduced.' Alternatively, we could put it like this - 'having fought his way through to the western extremity

of the lands of the Durotriges, would it have been appropriate for him to turn the might of his Legion and Auxiliaries against one of the then neighbouring tribes ?

I would say that the answer must be 'Yes.' We know that he returned to Rome in 47AD. At best his first campaigning season on his own would have been 44AD in which he would have to take the Isle of Wight, then turn on the Durotriges, who, it is generally accepted, were a 'hard nut to crack.' he would almost certainly occupy Vespasian's attention for more than one campaigning season. It can therefore be seen that he would not have had a great deal of time in which to 'reduce' another tribe unless he did so promptly.

Another look at the Tribal Map at this time (probably by now AD46) shows that there were only three other tribes in the vicinity. They were:

first, the Dumnonii, who occupied the area to the west of the Durotriges, namely present-day Devon and Cornwall;

secondly, the Dobunni, who occupied north Somerset, Bristol, Avon and Gloucestershire, a large area to the north of the Durotriges; and

thirdly, the Belgae, who it is believed occupied a somewhat fluid and changing area, probably comprising north Wiltshire, parts of west Hampshire and south Oxfordshire, all of which were mainly to the north of the Durotriges.

Let us consider the factors which might be considered relevant in respect of each of these in turn.....

First the Dumnonii: (a) Owing to the elongated shape of the territory they occupied and the very broken nature of the landscape, divided as it was, and is, by substantial, almost mountainous, moors (Dartmoor, Exmoor and Bodmin Moor), it is considered that the tribe was unlikely to be cohesive, but more probably divided into a loose federation of separate units under largely autocratic chieftains.

(b) It follows from this that there seems not to have been a central tribal control or power centre, nor an obvious *civitas* or tribal strongpoint around which defence of their territory might be conducted against an intruder, and from which some kind of cohesive control of tribal armies might be exercised.

(c) On the other hand, the elongated shape of the territory and its brokenness, and particularly the numerous and deep estuaries and river valleys, make the lands of the Dumnonii ideal for defence. By the same token, no Legion commander would look with pleasurable anticipation at the prospect of a campaign over such territory, involving as it would, difficult communications and extended supply lines.

(d) On page 98 of 'The Archaeology of South-West England'* is a map showing the distribution of different types of burial in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages. If this is a truly representative indication of concentrations of human population at that time, the striking conclusion can be drawn that, much earlier than the period with which we are concerned, the great majority lived in Cornwall, and that, with the exception of Exmoor and parts of Dartmoor, the present county of Devon did not then carry a great deal of population. It is difficult to know to what extent records of a period a few

thousand years earlier are of assistance, but it does look as if originally the inhabitants of the peninsula had studiously retreated into the fastnesses of their territory as an assurance against attack. Whether in the intervening years there were changes in the distribution of population and in their tactical thinking, we shall never know.

(e) Such studies also indicate that a high proportion of the population lived near or on the coast, underlining the evidence which one would expect, namely, that they were in the early days a maritime tribe, something which could probably be said also of their successors, the Dumnonii. Whether or not that tribe had a navy in any military sense is of course another matter, though like the maritime Gallic tribe of the Veneti in Brittany, they must have had the facilities for building warships had they so wished. But one suspects that they would be unlikely to attempt a challenge against the *Classis Britannicae*, the Roman navy.

(f) So far as is known the Dumnonii minted no coins of their own, unlike the Durotriges and the Dobunni. Again, this might be evidence of there being no central core of the tribe, and almost certainly no town of any size except possibly around a port such as Falmouth and Padstow.

(g) As far as our present knowledge goes, the Roman fortlet at Nanstallon, just beyond Bodmin Moor, is given an early date, perhaps 45 or 46. Its purpose was clearly to protect and supervise the valuable tin mines in the area which were probably vested in the Emperor Claudius. But the dating of the fort strikes an inconsistent note if we are going to doubt the likelihood and need for Vespasian continuing his assault westwards against the Dumnonii into the Devon/Cornwall peninsula following his 'reduction' of the Durotriges. But such inconsistency could be explained by diplomatic activity resulting in a pact of non-aggression on the part of the Roman invaders in exchange for the right to the tin mines.

The Dobunni: (a) Unlike the Dumnonii, the Dobunni did appear to have a tribal centre, originally located at Bagendon but later at Cirencester, which ultimately became their *civitas* with the name *Corinium Dobunorum*. They occupied the whole of the area of the Cotswolds and minted their own coins from which it seems that at times the tribe was divided into north and south sections.

(b) Like the Durotriges, they had a number of substantial hillforts, particularly those overlooking the Avon Gorge in the Bristol area and at Kingsweston Down and Blaise Castle, although there appears to be no evidence that any of them were fought over.

(c) In the Mendip Hills to the south, there were substantial and valuable lead mines. A small Roman fort at Charterhouse on Mendip is said to bear an early date - 45 or 46AD. This seems to throw up a similar situation to that at Nanstallon in Cornwall. Certainly there is the possibility that the Empire may have been short of lead, a material used very much in Rome. At all events, it seems likely that the Emperor would have expected to receive the benefits from these mines, if not by negotiation, then by coercion.

(d) In the earlier years there was for some time the added complication that the Romans wanted to open up the estuary of the River Parrett with the intention of creating an alternative route to the Channel ports for heavy materials and minerals. Their purpose was to avoid the undoubted hazards which existed for vulnerable sailing vessels negotiating the passage from the Bristol Channel round Lands End, or worse still, round the Scilly Isles. It has been suggested that the islands may well have been joined to the mainland two thousand years ago. So far as is known the alternative route was never used, but control of the land involved would have been regarded as essential.

(e) It is said that the Dobunni - "the dark haired ones" - were not a warlike tribe and that they readily accepted the Roman overlordship. They were primarily farmers and there is no evidence of resistance to the Romans. We seem to be devoid of information on the south Dobunni, particularly as to whether they had a tribal centre such as the northern part of the tribe appears to have had.

The Belgae: (a) This tribe originated from the area we now call Belgium, but at the time of Julius Caesar were said to occupy one third of Gaul, that is the area bounded by the rivers Seine and Marne to the south, and the Rhine to the north and west. They were a Gallic/Germanic tribe and must have been a substantial grouping. They resisted Caesar and were ultimately defeated by his armies in 54 BC. Undoubtedly during the following decades, numbers of them will have fled the continent to seek a new life on the nearby island of Britannia.

(b) Although their immigration would have been into various ports of Britannia, particularly what is now Southampton Water, like all migrants they would tend to congregate for security. It is clear that they favoured the central south coast, gradually crafting for themselves an awkwardly shaped and changeable area between the Regni on the east, the Atrebates to the north-east, the Durotriges to the south-west, the Dobunni to the west and the Catuvellauni to the north.

(c) With the Roman invasion of AD43 there is little doubt that it would have been the signal for a considerable increase in migration to Britannia. Migrants are opportunists, and many opportunities arise in a country which is the subject of invasion and military conflict. Furthermore, as is often the case with migrants, their birth rate has a tendency to be generally higher than that of indigenous tribes. There is reason to believe that there were many cases of the Belgae spilling into the territory of adjoining tribes. There is some evidence of border strife between them and the Durotriges who would have resisted their expansion. The Atrebates and Dobunni might well not have done so.

(d) At all events, the area the Belgae occupied is far from clear. The geographer Ptolemy shows their land extending from *Aquae Sulis* (Bath) to *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester) including a settlement called *Ischalis*, as yet unidentified. It is doubted whether such an area would have been viable at the period of which we are speaking. Indeed it was probably much later (around AD80) that the Roman administration granted *Venta* as their *civitas*, because the town was originally in the area occupied by the Atrebates.

(e) Unlike the indigenous tribes, the Belgae were probably unstable in their attitudes and policies, and certainly were more war-like than most, being anxious to extend their territory. They would have been unlikely to forget the treatment of their people at the hands of Caesar, but would doubtless co-operate with the Romans if it suited their purpose.

CONCLUSION: Putting oneself in the shoes of Vespasian, which of the three tribes mentioned above would he be more likely to wish to attack? - if indeed Suetonius was correct in saying that he had subdued two warlike tribes.

In any event, as has been suggested, he had little time at his disposal - it was probably early AD46 that he would have been making his decision, giving him at best little more than one campaigning season to achieve the 'reduction' of a tribe. The flimsy evidence that we have would suggest that he was more likely to be ordered to turn north against the Dobunni who would be unlikely to resist, rather than advance into the extensive, difficult and wild country occupied by the Dumnonii. The purpose of such orders, apart from securing the benefits of the Mendip lead mines, would be to bring the Second Legion closer to the Fourteenth in the West Midlands, and nearer what was turning out to be the centre of resistance against the Romans, namely the Welsh tribes.

But if, as was probable, he was ordered to turn north into the lands of the Dobunni, he would be leaving his right rear open to attack from the Belgae, an unstable tribe of doubtful allegiance with a historical score to settle. That being the case, tactics would dictate that he should neutralise the Belgae before advancing far to the north up the left bank of the Severn. It should be remembered that such an attack would be seen by the Romans (to whom *de bello gallico* was required reading !) as following the exploits of Julius Caesar.

For these reasons I think the second tribe was the Belgae.

Keith Perryman