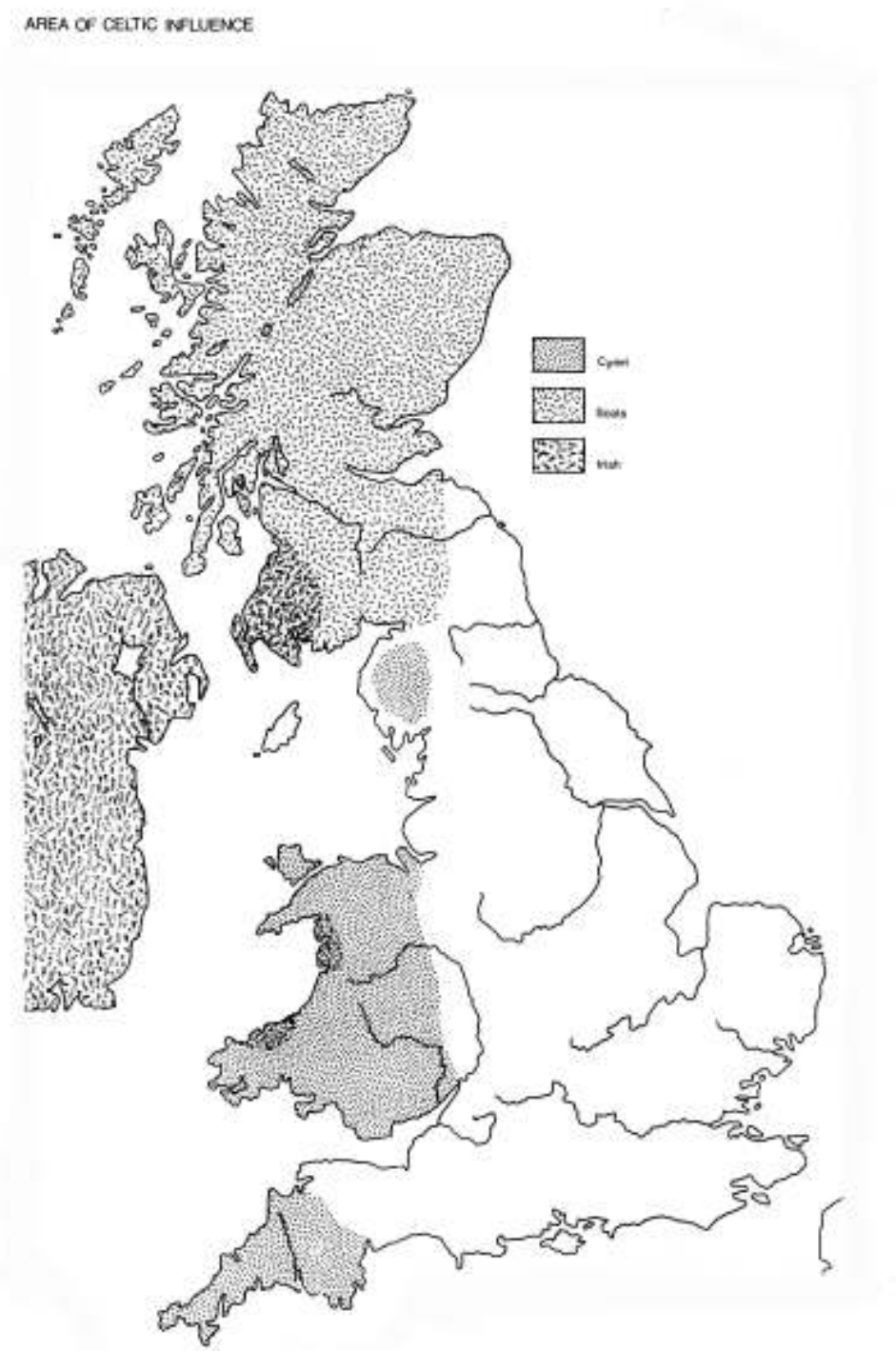
Members Handbook
CELT

Version 1
Published June 2007

*This handbook is based on original material from the Regia Anglorum Members Handbook (1992). It was originally compiled by **Ben and Sue Levick** and **Sue Farr**, with illustrations by **Colin and Ben Levick**. This section has been republished by **Ian and Hazel Uzzell** (June 2007). It is not intended to replace the new handbook currently under construction, but to act as a stopgap until it is published.*

Published January 2007

The Celts



THE CELTS

1. WHO WERE THE "CELTS?

By the tenth century the 'Celts' had ceased to exist as a completely separate people. Instead they had fragmented into smaller groups with a similar cultural background. Broadly speaking the main Celtic peoples were the Irish, the Welsh (or Cymri as they call themselves) and the post-Pictish Scots. The word Welsh is derived from the Saxon word "wealas" meaning 'foreigner' or 'slave' and was applied to all the native British. Despite a long history as separate peoples it seems the only place that retained a truly 'Celtic' lifestyle was Ireland. In Wales and Scotland the native 'Celts' seem to have emulated the invaders who had settled their lands (Norse in Scotland, Saxon in Wales) both in social structure and dress. It seems that the only dress differences any contemporary chroniclers thought worthy of note were the use of some Gaelic (not Pictish) style fabrics, and a less common use of shoes and armour by the 'Celtic' peoples, particularly the Welsh.

The 'Celtic' people lived mainly in harsh lands with poor resources. As a result they were generally a poor people, and many of their belongings would have been considered 'provincial' or even 'old-fashioned' by the neighbouring English and Vikings.

2. THE WELSH

The history of early medieval Wales is bedeviled by the lack of contemporary written and pictorial sources. As a result there are long periods of time where we know little or nothing about large areas of Wales.

This problem is compounded by the tendency of some of the earlier modem historians to retrospectively apply evidence from later medieval Wales e.g. the Laws of Hywel Dda (died 949) which first occur in thirteenth century copies of twelfth century manuscripts. While most historians agree that these laws must contain an element of earlier material, it is difficult to assess the precise amount. It is virtually impossible to tell which laws are twelfth century and which are earlier.

There was also a tendency among some earlier historians to apply the contemporary evidence from other Celtic nations to the Welsh, wrongly believing that there was a 'common' Celtic society sharing the same attitudes and institutions. The Celtic peoples considered themselves to be individual nations, and not part of some greater 'Celtic' nation. The Welsh thought of themselves as Cymri or Britons, the Irish thought of themselves as Gael, etc..

Fortunately we have good evidence for the continuity of certain practices in Wales, e.g. the 'multiple estates' system. This is only fully recorded in twelfth century law tracts, yet there is evidence in the Llandaff charters which suggests that a similar practice occurred in south-east Wales during the eighth century. Likewise there is much about life in twelfth century Wales recorded by the monk, Giraldus Cambrensis, which may also be applied to the eleventh and earlier centuries.

3. WELSH SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Rhi / Teyrn (King)

Uchelwr / Breyr (Nobles)

Aillt (Peasant)

Caeth (Slave)

There is less evidence for the Welsh social structure than that in Ireland or Brittany; yet this is still greater than the surviving evidence for Scotland, Cornwall and the Isle of Man. Only four classes of Welsh society can be identified from surviving documents: kings, nobles, tenant peasants and slaves. While it is possible that a fifth class of free landholding peasants also existed, there is no surviving evidence of this.

Kings (O.W. **Rhi** p1. **Rhiau** or **Teyrn** p1. **Teyrnedd**) claimed their right to rule by descent. Kingship was most frequently passed from father to son or brother to brother. The annals and genealogies stress *"dynastic dominance and dynastic continuity"*; sons were expected to succeed fathers. In practice kingdoms were sometimes shared, and occasionally quarreled over between brothers or uncle and nephew. Occasionally there were quarrels between father and son.

Wales unlike Scotland and Brittany, was never a single united kingdom. It was composed of several separate kingdoms each traditionally ruled by its own dynasty. These were, by the ninth century; Gwynedd, Powys, Ceredigion, Dyfed and Glywysing (also known as Morgannwg after Morgan Hen c.930 - 74, modem Glamorgan). Within some of these there also seem to have been sub-kingdoms, ruled either by members of the same dynasty, or by unrelated kings of unknown origin, e.g. Gwent, Ergyng and Builth in Glywysing. All these kingdoms could be dominated by one or more kings, or even none at all. It was also possible for one king to rule more than one kingdom (from the ninth century until 1063 the kings of Gwynedd also ruled Powys), or for conquered kingdoms to be divided between a king's sons. On the death of Rhodri Mawr in 878 his son Anarwd retained his father's kingdoms of Gwynedd and Powys, while his son Cadell ruled the newly conquered kingdom of Dyfed.

Kings were expected to be rulers, law givers, judges, leaders of the war band and protector of the Church and people. Their income appears to have been largely derived from their own personal estates, but there is some evidence from Glywysing that by the eighth century kings were establishing control over their nobles by exacting a land tax on estates. This took the form of a yearly render, usually of food, known as gwestfa. According to twelfth century law tracts this practice had become more widespread.

Nobles (O.W. **Uchelwr** p1. **Uchelwyr** or **Breyr** p1. **Brehyron**) were the free landowners in Wales, and as such formed the aristocracy. There is evidence for their existence from the sixth century. They owed their position to their hereditary freedom to own land, and the power this gave them over their tenant farmers and slaves. They owed no service, rent or due to the king other than the gwestfa, repair of bridges and roads on their lands, and service in war. The king might choose to ignore or remit

these as he wished, or a noble might be powerful enough to resist his monarch's attempts to enforce them.

Nobles owned their land in the form of large estates. These could be grouped together to form multiple estates, or spread over a wider area. They could dispose of their lands as they wished, provided interested parties such as heirs or kindred were in agreement, although for a while kings tried to control land grants to the Church. Nobles could act as foster parents to the sons of kings and other nobles' sons. They could also serve on the king's council (O.W. **Degion**) as a **Gwr Da** or good man, acting as royal officers and advisors. The Degion could even govern the kingdom in the king's absence. A noble's son might serve in the king's warband for a few years, receiving hospitality, arms, treasure and even land in return for his service, before returning to manage the estates.

Peasants (O.W. **Aillt** p1. **Eillt**) were bondsmen, the unfree tenant land holders of noble landlords. They were tied to the land and could not leave it without their lord's permission, and they accompanied the land if it was sold or granted away.

They lived in separate settlements known as a **tref** p1 **trefi** with the slaves who were under them. They worked the land, returning a food rent to their landlord and a twice yearly direct payment to the king of dawnbwyd; they did not do labour services. Peasants (and Nobles) could fall into slavery through economic reasons, as a penance, a criminal punishment, or as captives. There is no evidence that peasants could rise to the nobility and by the twelfth century their position was being eroded.

Peasants could do service in war. The twelfth century law tracts suggest the king could enforce them to do four days war service a year. They had to provide their own food and presumably their own arms as well. The late eleventh century work, the "Life of St Cadog" by Lifris mentions the slaughter of a peasant army in a dispute between two landlords.

Slaves (O.W. **Caeth** p1 **Caethion**) were primarily agricultural labourers, born into slavery and tied to the land. They were regarded as important property, however there is evidence that they were often undernourished and underfed. Slavery could be imposed as a religious penance or a criminal punishment. In their spare time both slaves and peasants could specialize in craft activities like smithying and shoemaking. Slaves were allowed to own goods and save money; they could and did, where possible, buy their freedom. There is no evidence that they were expected to arm themselves and fight, although it is not unthinkable that a slave employed as a door warden would be armed.

Unlike most of Western Europe, slavery in Wales did not decline during the period. This must be partly due to the harshness of the climate and the poor quality of most of the land, which created a great demand for labour. There is no evidence that a shortage of land occurred until the twelfth century when kings began designating certain areas as their hunting grounds rather than loose more land to the plough. Prior to that it was common to find records of the foundation of new settlements and associated land clearances for arable fields. Before the twelfth century the major barrier to agricultural expansion was the shortage of labour. This was clearly stated in several manuscripts. Lifris bemoans the slaughter of the peasant army, chiefly

because of the loss of labour it caused. It would have been the action of a foolish man to risk losing slaves in war. Land was useless without labour, whoever controlled it could work the land. As a result the servile population was maintained and the peasant population witnessed a decline in their position between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

4. WELSH WARFARE

There is little surviving evidence of Welsh military texts. Outside the formularised heroic literature, descriptions of battles, tactics and army compositions are rare. The main literary sources are:

1) "The Gododdin" - arguably a seventh century poem.

2) The lament for Cynddylan - from "Canu Llwyarch Hen" of the ninth century.

3) The "Armes Prydein" of the tenth century.

4) "The Four Branches of the Mabinogi" of early twelfth or possibly late eleventh century origin.

5) "Culhwch and Olwen" in the same manuscript as the Mabinogi but provenancable from a slightly earlier period.

There are also brief mentions in the pre-twelfth century "Lives" of four saints: Cadog, Illtud, David, and Samson.

Overwhelmingly the evidence speaks of the king and his mounted war-band who were drawn from the nobility. There may be a bias against the inclusion of the peasantry in the records of some of the larger battles, but for the average raid this was clearly all that was needed. Some of the more powerful nobles may also have had their own war-band. Warriors could fight on horseback or on foot. The spear was the principle weapon, but nobles were recorded as owning a sword and wearing a mail shirt - presumably kings did so too. The round shield and knife were also standard equipment. There are no descriptions of armed peasants in the literature. However, as they could certainly be called upon for military service we may assume they would have armed themselves with the crudest of weapons: spear and shield, knife, wood axe, bow or some agricultural implement. Peasants would probably have travelled and fought on foot.

Of greater use to the Welsh kings of the tenth and eleventh centuries was the supply of Viking and Saxon mercenaries. The Viking mercenaries were probably drawn from Dublin and paid in silver in the form of coin or hack-silver, for there were no major Scandinavian settlements in Wales. Archaeological and documentary evidence seems to suggest that the Vikings concentrated almost exclusively on the lower lying coastal areas. The vast majority of raids were seaborne and most were aimed at Anglesey or Dyfed. Settlement probably only occurred on a relatively large scale in Dyfed, if the place name evidence is to be accepted. The archaeological evidence is mostly limited to chance finds along the coastline, although there is a possible settlement site on the isle of Grassholm. The English also allowed themselves to be used as mercenaries, playing off one Welsh king against another, and occasionally employing the Welsh in their own campaigns. It is clear that the availability of mercenaries in eleventh century Wales promoted warfare on a greater scale than was usual before.

The archaeological evidence for weapons is virtually non-existent, due to the lack of

excavated early medieval sites. The Welsh were Christians and did not normally bury weapons with their dead. There are a few spearheads of non Anglo-Saxon type that cannot be dated to the Iron Age or Roman periods. There is also a very fine silver sword hilt decorated in an Anglo-Saxon style from Radnorshire, now on display in the British Museum. There are no depictions of fighting men on surviving stone sculptures, likewise the very few early Welsh manuscripts that survive do not depict fighting men.

5. WELSH DRESS

MALE DRESS

There is very little evidence to substantiate what the Welsh wore in our period. The small amount of surviving evidence suggests that there is no difference between what the Welsh and English wore. The only item worthy of note is that amongst the lower classes shoes seem to have been less common amongst the Welsh.

Given the 'Celtic' love of decoration it seems fair to presume that the clothing of the upper classes would be highly decorated. However, as Wales was relatively poor, silk would probably have been less common than it was amongst the English and Vikings. It is also possible that simple checked cloth was more popular amongst the Welsh than other cultures.

FEMALE DRESS

Even less is known about women's clothing than men's. It is probable that this too was similar to the dress worn in England. There is a small amount evidence to suggest that Welsh women did not always cover their heads; although ethnological evidence suggests they would have covered their heads in public, or whenever they were working - even within their own homes.

WELSH NAMES

MALE NAMES

Addonwy Afan Aneirin Aeddan Amig Amlyn Athrwys Arddur
Buddfannan Blaen Bledri Bradwen Bleddig

Cadfannan Cadfael Cadwallon Cilydd Cynon Cynfan Cyfulch Cynrain Cunvelyn Caradoc Cibno Ceredig Cadlew Cynwal Clydno Cynhafal

Dafydd Defi Dwyai
Edar Edern Eiddef Erthgi Elad Elffin Eudaf

Gwefrfawr Gwegon Gwion Gwyn Gwarddur Gwern Gwyleged Gwrien Gwraid Gorthyn
Gwaednerth Gwengad Gwenabwy Gwrfelling Gwair Graid Geriant Gwanon

Hyfaidd Hywel
Ieuan

Llywel
Marchlew Moried Morien Madog Morial Mynyddog Merin

Neilyn Nwythorn Nai Nerthaid Niddig Nidian
Owain

Padern Pedrog
Ricerch Rhodri Rhufon Rhun

Sawel Seriol Sywno
Tathal Tathan Tudfwlch Tyngyr

Uren Uwain
Ysgarran

FEMALE NAMES

Adwen Annest Angarad Arianwen
Briant

Collwen
Duddug Dwynwen

Eleri
Ffraid

Glesig Glesni Gwen
Heledd

Indeg
Leri Lleucu Llio

Melangell Meleri
Nest Nia