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Pre-Roman Civilisation in Britain – R W Morgan (1858)

Here are two contributions to a Victorian publication, bearing on the question of whether pre-Roman Britain was civilised or not. One is followed by the name of R W Morgan, who went on to author *St. Paul in Britain* (1861), while the second is signed simply 'β'.

Replies.

PRÆ-ROMAN CIVILISATION OF BRITAIN.

(2nd S. v. 415.)

In reply to **INQUIRER** there can be, I imagine, little doubt of the existence of a Præ-Roman civilisation in Britain, in some respects of a much higher order than obtained in the East. In support of such view the following, among numerous evidences, may be adduced:—

1. No tin mines, except those of Cornwall, were worked to any extent in the ancient world. As early as the era of Moses a vigorous trade in tin and copper, and their composite, bronze, was conducted between Britain and Phœnicia. Ezekiel, B.C. 640, specifies tin as one of the staple imports of Tyre, and this could have been supplied by Britain only. In the oldest British laws, metallurgy is classed in the first rank of fine arts with poetry and music. Probably there never was a time when the men of Cornwall were not, as now, the first miners in the world.

2. Cæsar, who was the first great foreigner that invaded Britain, found both a civil and military system long established, different from, but, judging from the patent facts on the face of his own account of his two campaigns, quite able to cope with those of Rome. His description conveys the impression of a country settled for centuries under an organised constitution and government—corn abundant and easily procured—the population so thick as to strike him with amazement (“*infinita hominum est multitudo*”)—villages and hamlets studding the country in clusters (*creberrima*), and stock of all kinds unlimited. The civilisation which produced and assured such a state of security for life and property could not have been of recent origin.

3. The heroic system of warfare, such as ^{is,} *Hodito* describes it, expired in Asia at the battle of the *bela*, B.C. 325; but Cæsar found it in full force, by ^{the} *tion* in Britain, carried to a perfection ^{reached} with ^{by} *attained* in the East, and an ^{is,} *overn* ^{paper,} and ^{is} *all it is sized*.

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own admission, for the Roman legions. The British chariot system combines, he states, the solidity of infantry with the rapidity of cavalry. The Scriptures speak of the 900 chariots of Jabin, king of Canaan, as an extraordinary number, but Cæsar alleges that the mere reserve retained by the British Pendragon or Dictator Caswallon, after dismissing the rest of his forces, amounted to 4000 of these formidable engines—against which the Roman cavalry were helpless for either defence or offence.

3. Cæsar and his army, the conquerors of the Continent of Europe, of Asia, of Africa, of Rome itself, must be acknowledged the most formidable, as they were the first, of the invaders of Britain. William the Norman and his feudal levies were comparatively barbarians in both science and discipline. Yet William in one battle made such a complete conquest of the land, that the effects of it remain to this day: whilst Cæsar was met with in six pitched fields, had his own camp twice assaulted, failed in two campaigns to advance beyond St. Alban's, left not a Roman soldier behind, and lost for a time, as the result of his discomfiture, all his Gallic acquisitions. For another century the Roman empire, though wielding a force of 500,000 men (legionaries and auxiliaries), did not venture a second attempt on Britain. It is obvious, I think, that Britain B.C. 55 was a more formidable power, and occupied a higher position in military science and social civilisation, than the Britain of A.D. 1066.

4. No one who has examined the British and Roman systems of castrametation and field works as exemplified in the camps which, in the west especially, may be seen yet confronting each other with hostile grandeur, will I think hesitate in assigning with Sir Christopher Wren the palm of science to the British. If the power of continuous labour is the true test of civilisation, then the Briton was not inferior to the Roman. "It would occupy," calculates Hutton (p. 136.), "5000 men a whole year to construct the encampment of Hên Dinas (old Oswestry)." Yet Hên Dinas is far from being the largest of our ancient British "Caerau." And it must be remembered we see them now, not in the pride of their first estate—with fosses, portals, chariot-ways, ramparts, and towers—but as ruins,—the relics of nigh two thousand years of the ravages of time.

5. Turning to non-military earth-works, every known artificial mound dwarfs into very humble dimensions by the side of Silbury Hill and Caer Sallwg (Old Sarum). No "Mons Sacer" for holding the assizes of a tribe "sub Dio," in accordance with the Druidic system, by which all judicial, all civil proceedings were transacted in the face of the sun, between sunrise and sunset, assumes the magnificent dimensions of the Silurian Mote (the Hereford beacon); and though "mys-

tic" Herbert insists on crediting the Neo-Druidism of Post-Roman Britain with the construction of these enormous piles, we see no reason for dissenting from the old belief in their Præ-Roman chronology. But even these sink into second-class illustrations of engineering skill and patience compared with the British embankment of the Thames from Richmond to Gravesend, attributed to Belinus, B.C. 680, worthy to be the masterpiece of the Titanic navvies who had tried their hands previously on such masses as the above. In Camden's time it was the fashion to father all monuments attesting grandeur of conception and execution on the Romans, though a walk around any earthwork admitted to be British might have opened the eyes of any but a determined Anti-Briton to the evidence before him that there was a nation at home equal to their accomplishment. Polybius, Justin, Livy, and Florus, concur in naming Brennus and Belgovesus as the founders of most of the great Cisalpine cities. That these were British kings is now pretty generally granted. That they were conquerors, bringing civilisation and not Vandalism in their train, is obvious from the cities and the nature of the empire founded by them. Such civilisation must have accompanied them out of Britain, nor shall we greatly err if we consider the wondrous embankment of the Po a sister-work to that of the Thames by the same British sovereigns.

6. The lithic ruins of the old Druidic temples extend over Britain from Cornwall to the Hebrides. These vast circles of obelisks were the scenes of the national solemnities, festivities, and games; the originals of the Olympic and other games of early Hellas, of the Campus Martius of Rome, of the Champ de Mai of Gaul, of the Courts Plenieres of after ages. Amesbury has disappeared: fragments only of Stonehenge remain. These "Caerau" were lithic planetariums or orreries representing the great temple of the universe, and, as it would tax our utmost mechanical ingenuity to convey and adjust the immense solitary obelisks composing them, so it would, we apprehend, puzzle Professor Airey or Hind to restore them to their primitive astronomical accuracy. "Multa (says Cæsar of the Druids) de sideribus atque eorum motu tradunt." Druidism and Pythagoreanism were in most respects the same philosophy. The Copernican system is, as everybody knows, the Pythagorean or Druidic revived and proved; the Druidic circles, therefore, must have delineated the true system of the heavens. Indeed the Greek appellation for the Druids was derived from the British term for astronomer (*Saronidæ*, from *sér*, stars; *seron*, the starry system; *seronydd*, an astronomer). But all this material and philosophic science flourished long before the Roman invasion. In Cæsar's time the Druidic colleges in Britain were frequented by the élite

of Gaul; many of them reckoned 10,000 students, some of whom remained voluntarily twenty years "in disciplinâ." The remains of the Druidic theosophy which have come down in the old British language certainly embody a religion — whatever the popular impressions to the contrary may be — as pure in all moral respects as Christianity itself, and as superior as light to darkness to the mythological Pantheism of Greece and Rome. It is of course in one sense true that Christianity brought the immortality of the soul to light; but it is also true that before the birth of Christianity, such immortality was the cardinal tenet in the Druidic religion of our ancestors. "In primis (states Cæsar) hoc volunt persuadere animas non interire, atque hoc maxime ad virtutem excitari putant." — "Above all things they inculcate the immortality of the soul, affirming that this truth is the greatest of all motives to virtue." I would also observe that the principle of vicarious atonement, on which Christianity rests, was another fundamental of Druidism, nor is it anywhere more clearly laid down in the Scriptures than it is by Cæsar himself eighty years before it received its consummation, and consequently its abolition, in the crucifixion on Calvary — "Quod pro vitâ hominis, nisi hominis vita reddatur non posse aliter Deorum immortalium numen placari arbitrantur Druidæ" (*Lib. vi. c. xvi.*). — "The Druids hold that by no other way than the ransoming of man's life by the life of man is reconciliation with the Divine justice of the immortal Gods possible." In this and other important points Druidism may be said to have taught Christianity before Christianity itself was founded; hence the ease with which Britain, the central seat of Druidism, became, as early as the second century, "prima Christiana gens," the first Christian nation, Christianity elsewhere being confined to families.

7. In the primitive laws of Britain, as contained in the code of Dyfnwal of Cornwall, we have the basis of the common law of England, the bulwark in all ages of our civil liberties against the Roman and canon laws. It is the key to all our British as opposed to Continental institutions, and the most splendid relic we possess of Præ-Roman Europe. Eastern civilisation has produced nothing resembling it in form, far less in its spirit of freedom.

8. The last proof I adduce is the language — the most important monument of a people's history, the least fallible index of the civilisation of the past. The British language is homogeneous, and self-contained with all its roots in itself; every word is a picture to the eye, hence its extraordinary oratorical and poetic power. As the poetry of a language is that which imparts to it its vitality, I content myself with transcribing the opinion of the editor of the American *Theologia Sacra* on the British Poetic System: "All other

metrical systems compared to the British Bardic are, in point of elaborate polish and regularity, little better than loose prose or barbaric jingling." Now this system also, to which ancient Nineveh, Egypt, Assyria, India, can offer "nil simile aut secundum," was in as active and general operation throughout the Druidic colleges of Britain before the Roman era as the classical examinations are now at Cambridge and Oxford. The Druids taught Divinity through the medium of metrical language, regulated by the most stringent rules. The Druidic alumni, states Cæsar, "learn a great number of verses by heart." The prosodial canons of Bardism were expressly framed to prevent the possibility of depraving or corrupting the metrical texts in which the Druidic religion was conveyed. With the substitution of Christianity the original object disappeared, but the canons still remain in force; and the difficulties to be surmounted by a Welsh bard before he can produce a composition which will pass their ordeal would astound an English versifier: yet there is no land so full as Wales of native poets; the language breeds them. The system, as it preceded Cæsar's era, has never, not even during the murderous persecutions of Druidism by the old Roman government, been since extinct. It was witnessed in Gaul by Lucan, as any one may witness it now at a Welsh Eisteddfod —

"Vos quoque qui fortes animas belloque preemptas
Laudibus in longum vates dimittitis ævum,
Plurima securi fudistis carmina, Bardi."

Whether, then, military organisation, engineering skill, material monuments, religion, philosophy, poetry, or social government be adopted as the criterion of civilisation, there appears to have existed a Præ-Roman civilisation in Britain which loses little by comparison with the cotemporary state of things in the peninsula of Italy and Greece. Of pithy and manly oratory the speech of Caractacus at Rome remains yet a model, and it is probably a fair specimen of the old Druidic style of address. On especial distinction in certain of the "Fine Arts" the Briton has never prided himself; Italy is still his mistress: but in the solid desiderata of social polity, laws, liberty, morality, I am inclined to believe the Old Island had then, as now, the best of it. R. W. MORGAN.

There is little hope of our getting any rational account of the social and political state of the ancient Britons so long as the fashion prevails of excluding all other historical testimony respecting them but that of their Roman conquerors. Since the days of Julius Cæsar the absurd and ungenerous notion has been stereotyped, that our primitive race was sunk in the lowest depths of ignorance and barbarism, until happily rescued from thence by his "highly civilise" country.

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men and followers. When will our *classical* zealous profit by the first chapter of a certain apostolical epistle?

Long before the first Roman invasion — long, indeed, before the Roman eagle was fledged — this country was regularly traded to by the Greeks (following in the wake of the Phœnicians), whose incidental notices of its inhabitants suggest a better state of things than that invented by the admirers of him, who, as the poet Lucan tells us, and truly, —

“Territa quassitis ostendit terga Britannia,”

never to return!

The Father of History (B.C. 450) alludes to the established commerce of Britain (Herod. *Hist.* iii. 115.) The preceptor of Alexander, Aristotle (B.C. 340) speaks of the Britannic Isles as familiarly known to his countrymen (*de Mundo*, § 3.). The Cappadocian geographer, Strabo, also bears witness to the commercial enterprise of the Britons, and describes them (not as painted savages, but) as “walking with staves, and wearing beards, and garments girded at the waist and flowing down to their heels.” (B. III. c. v. § 11.) It is well known, too, that Polybius (B.C. 200) meditated composing a history of the British manufacture and trade in lead and tin—metals which, for many ages, were exclusively produced in this country; and exchanged, according to Pliny, for the most precious gems (“India neque æs neque plumbum habet, gemmisque suis ac margaritis hæc permutat”).

It requires no great stretch of the imagination to conceive that a people who were thus occupied and capable of bartering with foreigners their native manufactures “of lead and tin together with skins,” for “earthenware, salt, and works in brass,” as Strabo relates, were worthy the notice of an accomplished Greek historian. The only difficulty is, how to reconcile the avowed intention of Polybius, and the opinions of his equally intelligent countrymen, with the Roman “authorities,” and the modern notion that such a people “were little superior to the natives of the Sandwich Islands.”

But independently of sundry *impartial* notices by Greek writers, we fortunately possess no small portion of the religious and civil laws of these supposititious savages. *The Triads of the Isle of Britain*, as they are designated by their own framers, relate of persons and events from the earliest period to the commencement of the seventh century of the Christian era, as well as contain the institutional and theological principles upon which the political and religious system of the buſent Britons was based. These interesting

“ials of ancient wisdom and piety have
Anci. of course, no better fate than their au-
I purch. have been referred to a *mediæval*
It is statec at the Augustinian monks, like the
at Cowdry,

Egyptian priesthood, must have preserved one creed amongst themselves, whilst they taught their disciples another! The absence of all allusion to *miracles*, which constituted the religious capital of the Middle Ages, is alone sufficient to disprove a monkish origin of the *Triads*. Moreover, the laws of Howel the Good, who flourished in the tenth century, are avowedly borrowed from the code which was in force in this island centuries before the advent of Cæsar, or in the age of Moel-mud, B.C. 400. The first-mentioned laws have been wisely reprinted by H. M. Record Commissioners, who, I understand, will shortly give to the public translations also of the more ancient ones. I doubt not, therefore, the time will arrive when our classical votaries will shake off some of their educational prejudices, and cease to refer *all* effects of civilisation — that is to say, literature, arts, and sciences — exclusively to a Greek or Roman origin; and perhaps agree with old Hesiod, Aratus, Ovid, and others, that the *Golden Age* really did precede that of *Iron*. β.

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