Offa's Dyke
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A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 5

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Reconstruction of the Olger Dyke at Gårdeby Mark (Jørgen Andersen, Museum Sønderjylland, Arkæologi Haderslev). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney.

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'Cofiwn i Facsen Wledig/
We remember Macsen the Emperor:'[1]
Frontiers, Romans, and Welsh Identity

Roger H. White

Taking as its starting point the commonly held public perspective that Wales was largely unconquered by the Romans and was indeed a focus of resistance to Roman rule, this article argues from the archaeology to demonstrate that such perceptions are misleading. Archaeological evidence demonstrates Rome certainly conquered and held Wales throughout its occupation of Britain. Furthermore, its hold on Wales was so firmly established by the second century that Rome's identity was fully stamped upon the territory and was maintained by the peoples of Wales after the end of Roman rule. The degree to which Wales was in the end Romanised is encapsulated in the post-Roman identity of the emerging Welsh kingdoms which consciously looked back to the Roman Emperor, Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig in Welsh) for their foundation as actual and spiritual successors to Roman power. Rather than offering resistance to Rome, it can be argued instead that notions of Roman power provided the peoples of Wales with the means to resist the rise of English power in the immediate post-Roman period.

Keywords: Frontiers, Roman *Limes*, Welsh identity, Roman Wales, Silures, Magnus Maximus

The Roman Frontier in Wales

On 6 June 2022, *The Guardian* published an article that was headed 'Romans ventured deeper into Wales than thought, road discovery shows' (Alberge 2022). The article reported the realisation that an existing stretch of unburied and well-preserved road in the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire was Roman in date. In the article, Dr Mark Merrony acknowledges that his recognition of the existence of the road will surprise those who believed that the Roman presence in Wales was slight, and fleeting: 'I think they'll go crazy in Wales over this because it's pushing the Roman presence much more across Pembrokeshire. There's this perception that the Romans didn't go very far in Wales, but actually they were all over Wales.' One might take this as understandable excitement following a new discovery, but the perception of the lack of penetration of the Romans into Wales is not simply a popular misconception: indeed it is still a stated position of Cadw, the Welsh heritage agency:

> The Romans under the command of Governor Aulus Platius [*sic*] arrived in Britain in AD 43 ... They soon roared through southern England but hit the buffers when they reached the mountains and valleys – and fiercely unwelcoming native Celtic tribes – of Wales. It would take

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them another 25 years or so to subjugate this troublesome mix of terrain and tribal resistance, though – unlike intensively Romanised southern and eastern Britain – Wales was never conquered in the fullest sense. Although only a partial conquest, it still left Wales with some of Britain's most revealing and significant Roman sites. (Cadw 2023)

The reality is more in agreement with Merrony's conclusion: archaeology shows that the Romans were indeed 'all over Wales'. This has been underlined by the range of new sites in often surprising locations found during the 2018 drought (Driver *et al.* 2020), but why is there a persistent misapprehension in the popular imagination that the Roman Army did not occupy the whole country? And if parts of Wales were not occupied by the Romans, then where is the Roman Frontier in Wales to be found? Clearly, we are dealing with two separate, but linked, issues here: the modern perception of a general hostility to Rome within Wales, and the concept that, because of this general hostility – the idea that Rome never really conquered all of Wales – that there must be a frontier somewhere that might demarcate those parts of Wales that were welcoming to Rome's presence and those who were hostile to it. The natural assumption today would be to place that frontier where it is now – roughly on Offa's Dyke – but this cannot have been the case in the Roman era before the dyke was constructed. As has recently been emphasised, the post-Roman date for Offa's Dyke cannot be in doubt, despite all attempts to argue otherwise (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2019: 57) and there is no reason to suggest, or evidence for, a Roman predecessor for such a structure.

The idea of a Welsh resistance to Roman imperialism was, and is, still attractive in the eyes of those who fight against the domination of the peoples of Wales by external powers, whether these be Roman or English. However, the archaeological evidence for resistance is certainly more nuanced than this stance suggests, and caution is needed with such an argument. As Mattingly observes:

> in northern and western Britain ... the history of rule from London in more recent centuries has led to the Roman period being equated as 'more of the same'. The tendency here is to present Rome as provoking resistance and non-conformity in terms that reflect the twentieth-century rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism and Cornish regionalism. This has the potential to present as distorted a view of history as those who uncritically assert the natural justice of Roman rule. (Mattingly 2006: 5)

Those arguing for such a position can point to some apparent academic support in that the framing by academics of the Roman archaeology of Wales since the 1950s has been through the lens of the Roman army's presence there, as epitomised by the standard work on Roman Wales: *The Roman Frontier in Wales*. As we shall see, the title, and thrust, of the work arises from tacit acceptance of Francis Haverfield's contention that Wales lay within a purported 'military' zone, which might be characterised as those parts of the island that

the Romans thought too difficult to retain, or just not worth conquering in the first place. It is an idea that no longer receives unqualified support (Hingley 2016: 13–19).

The first edition of *The Roman Frontier in Wales* was written by the then Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum of Wales, Victor Erle Nash-Williams and published in 1954, a year before the author's untimely death (Nash-Williams 1954). It provided an overview and gazetteer of the known Roman military sites in Wales and the neighbouring regions of England. At that time there was little chronological information to differentiate between the types of sites noted, although two sites are tentatively identified as part of the initial invasion. The second edition was substantially rewritten and edited by Mike Jarrett and published in 1969 (Jarrett and Nash-Williams 1969). Jarrett was able to add many more sites, details of some of which were provided by other contributing authors, alongside a greater understanding of the chronology. The third and latest version was produced under the joint editorship of Barry Burnham and Jeffrey Davies. It developed and expanded Jarrett's format with many other authors contributing entries (including the current author; Burnham and Davies 2010). While these various editions differ, of course, in detail and especially in the number of sites discussed, their basic aim is to document the Roman military sites of Wales and the Marches, and to offer an historical overview of the development of the Roman military presence in Wales and its borderlands. While the third edition will not be the final word on the subject, it has established a detailed chronological and spatial understanding of the Roman Army's presence in Wales and the Marches. Furthermore, it also broadened out the argument to consider the wider impact of the Roman occupation of Wales, including the economic relationship between the army and the native peoples through settlement and material culture, especially through pottery and coinage.

The question of how the pattern of the Roman military presence in Wales can be considered a frontier was addressed by Nash Williams. He observed that Ostorius Scapula, the first Roman general to invade Wales, '... established a temporary frontier-line, supported by legionary camps (*castra*) taking in all the lowland zone east of the rivers Trent and Severn.' (Nash-Williams 1954: 1). Following this initial phase, he defined the final developed version of the frontier (which archaeology now dates to the Flavian period, c. AD 69–79 – see below) thus:

> [the frontier] in its main outlines took the form of a great defensive quadrilateral with the inner [eastern] angles resting on the two [*sic*] legionary fortresses [i.e. Chester and Caerleon; Wroxeter had not at that time been recognised as a legionary fortress], the outer angles [western] on major auxiliary stations at Caernarvon (*Segontium*) and Carmarthen (*Moridunum*), and the periphery and interior stiffened and strengthened with a complex of valley roads and forts centring on two large pivotal stations at Caersws and Brecon. (Nash-Williams 1954: 7)
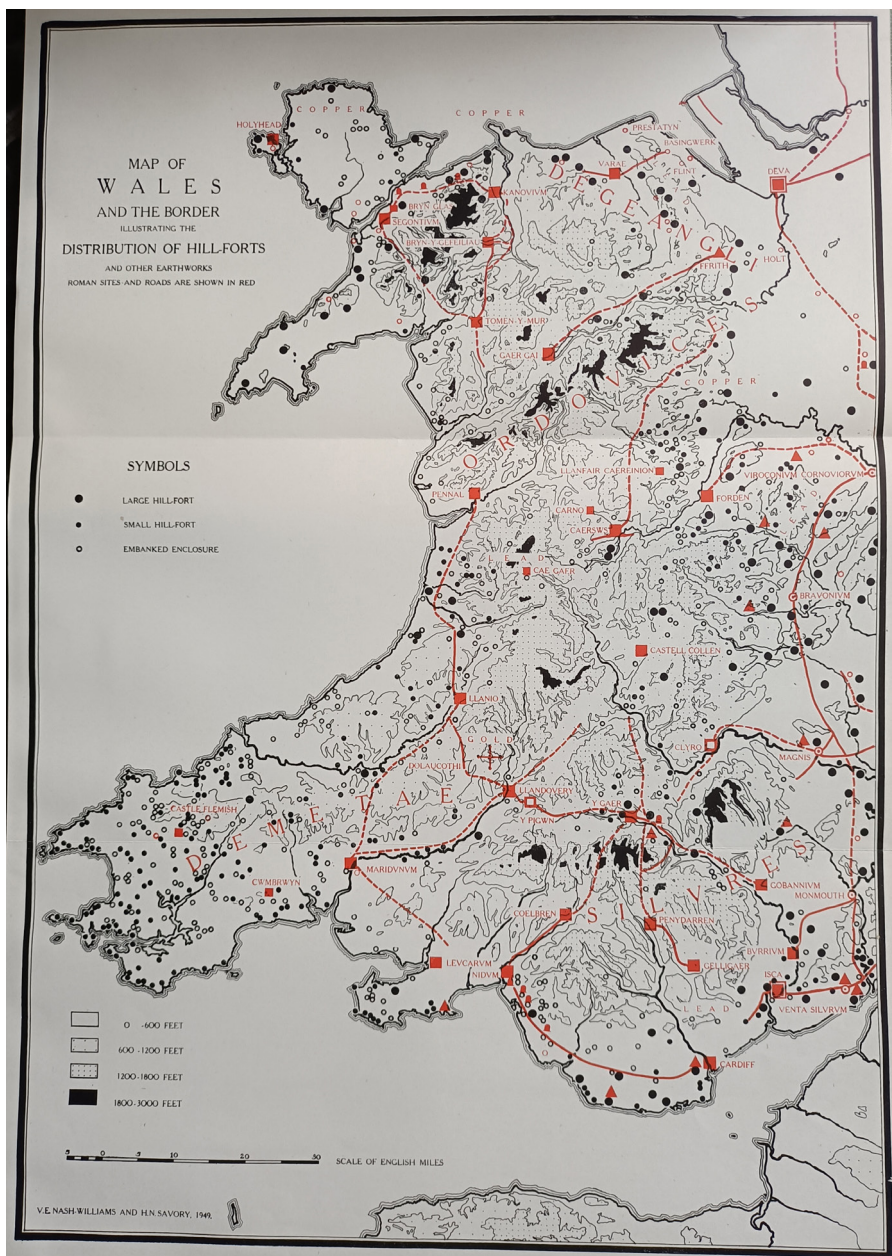
Figure 1: The Roman Frontier in Wales, as understood in 1954 (after Nash-Williams 1954, figure 62)

It is a concise and accurate delineation of the system at its most developed (Figure 1) and, as Nash-Williams points out, demonstrates a clear understanding by the Roman army of the realities of Welsh geomorphology (Nash-Williams 1954: 6). He understood that in reconstructing how the Romans interacted with Wales, it is vital to engage too with the archaeology of the area that we now call the Welsh Marches, a point reiterated

by Mike Jarrett: 'For the Roman period 'Wales' is merely a convenient geographical expression … the student of Roman Britain must take as his (*sic*) eastern boundary the line of the rivers Dee and Severn' (1969: 1). Thus, straight away our understanding of Roman Wales has to encompass parts of modern England too so there is no 'natural' frontier here at all, not even the Dee, Severn, or Wye, since these were more corridors of communication than natural barriers to east-west movement.

Peter Guest, in his contribution to the Frontiers of the Roman Empire series of booklets which outline the many components of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (WHS), a transnational WHS that seeks to recognise and protect the entire length of the frontier of the Roman Empire in all its diverse manifestations (UNESCO 2022), describes the current understanding of the nature of the Roman frontier in Wales.

> The militarised frontiers in Wales are unique in the Roman Empire. Unlike the well-known linear defensive boundaries such as Hadrian's Wall or the Antonine Wall in northern Britain, or along the Rhine and Danube rivers connecting the North and Black Seas, the forts and fortresses in western Britain formed a dynamic, and relatively short-lived, offensive frontier designed to deal with the Celtic tribes living there. Whereas later frontiers were static barriers demarcating the limits of Roman imperial authority, the frontier in Wales was a fortified zone that adapted to the changing military situation as Rome's generals fought against, defeated and pacified the hostile Britons. (Guest 2022: 37)

This concept of an 'offensive frontier' is a neat encapsulation of the Roman military *modus operandi* from roughly the late Republic (after c. 202 BC) to the end of the reign of Trajan (r. AD 98–117). It is a form of 'attack in depth', an aggressive absorption of territory from a secure line of advance in which corridors of attacking troops advance into enemy territory, fortifying the lines of attack as they go through the construction of forts linked by roads to create a network. This network is then used to secure the next line of advance so that the process can continue when the freshly conquered territory is secured. At the core of this approach lay a concept that Roman power was infinite in time and space – *imperium sine fine* as the Augustan poet Vergil put it (*Aeneid* Book 1: 278–279). What this often meant in practice was the identification of a territory to seize, usually under the pretext of dealing with a perceived or actual threat to Roman power offered by an individual or a tribe(s), the invasion of that territory, often using overwhelming force, then the occupation of the newly acquired territory through a network of fortresses and forts. The newly pacified lands could then be gradually settled permanently through the creation of towns, often located on redundant military sites and populated by veterans whose presence would ensure security and an increasing Roman identity for the territory. The process is described by Cornelius Tacitus, writing in the early second century about a pocket of land, known as the *agri decumates*, that lay

between the Rhine and Danube: 'The most useless Gauls, made audacious by poverty, occupied these lands of precarious ownership; subsequently a road was constructed, garrisons were moved forward, and they are now reckoned an outlying recess of the empire and part of the province' (Tacitus *Germania* 29: 4). In its earliest manifestations, in Gaul and Spain, the policy worked well, creating Romanised communities loyal to the idea of Empire; in Britain and Germany the idea worked less smoothly, or (in Germany beyond the Rhine) hardly at all.

Guest's 'offensive frontier' is recognition that, at the time of the invasion and conquest of Britain, Roman authorities had no concept of a fixed frontier in the modern sense of the word. The idea that one could, and should, construct a linear barrier or its equivalent is one that gradually developed from the time of Domitian (r. AD 81–96) before finding its fullest, and innovative, expression in structures like Hadrian's Wall, only a generation later than Domitian. The first expression of these developments in Britain was a series of watch towers along the Gask Ridge in Scotland built in Domitian's reign, overlooking a road connecting forts where the garrisons employed in holding and policing territory were located. A second example is the Trajanic Stanegate System, a series of forts (including Vindolanda) built around AD 105 and strung at periodic intervals along an east–west route which formed an immediate precursor to Hadrian's Wall and lay just to the south of its line (Breeze and Dobson 2000: 16–24; Hodgson 2017: 33–37). The connecting road was termed by the Romans a *limes* (pl. *limites*) differentiating it from *via*, the more usual word for a road. *Limes* has thus been adopted as the modern term to describe frontier systems in the Roman world, although it is worth stressing that it is not a term that the Romans themselves used to describe the barriers that divided the Empire from *Barbaricum* (Isaacs 1988). The Gask Ridge and Stanegate systems were not frontiers: they were early-warning systems. A trip-wire to enable the army to react to an actual or perceived threat developing in hostile territory so that a force attempting to attack Roman-controlled territory could be dealt with swiftly. The recognition of these 'systems' is a modern rationalisation of the evidence; there is no evidence that the Romans themselves had a name for these systems and certainly they did not call them 'frontiers' in the modern concept of the word. They were, however, certainly aware of lines demarcating territory in the sense of boundaries that separated peoples – the concept of 'us' and 'them' – but that is not the same as a defended frontier.

Thus, in some senses though Nash-Williams's understanding of the Roman frontier in Wales can be considered incorrect in that, as already noted, the Romans at the time of the conquest of Wales had no idea of a frontier, their approach to conquering Wales was just that: the implementation of the usual policy when dealing with territory that needed to be brought under Roman control. It is unlikely that they thought in terms of finding somewhere to halt their conquest permanently or considered excluding those parts of Wales that were only lightly inhabited or had difficult terrain. In short, it is difficult to find anything innovative in the Roman commanders' approach to conquering Wales, unlike (for example) Hadrian's revolutionary approach in northern Britain, although

one can acknowledge that the Roman army was, by this time, masters of the techniques of subjugation. This is hardly surprising given that exactly the same Emperors who implemented the policy in Wales, Vespasian and Titus, were both familiar with and had campaigned in Britain (Birley 2005: 232–233, 279–280), and had just vanquished the even more intractable peoples of, and hostile environment in, Judea (Faulkner 2011).

The mis-match in modern understandings of frontiers, and retrospective readings of Roman history, is manifest in the now-discredited idea of the 'Fosse Way Frontier' (Millett 1990: 55). This postulated that the establishment of the Fosse Way, which runs from Exeter to the Humber Estuary and was thus one of the primary routes of Britain, had been conceived from the beginning of the invasion as a frontier delimiting the part of Britain that Rome knew and desired to conquer from that part of the British Isles that was largely highland and thus not worth conquering (Webster 1958). The frontier was suggested to comprise the Fosse Way as a *limes* allowing the rapid movement of the army along its route and in effect police the border of Empire, while the forts and fortresses scattered along its length offered the tactical support for such a role (Webster 1980: 123; Webster 1981: 21). This argument fails to make sense at two levels. First, as already noted, is that at this stage of Roman imperial thinking there was no concept of a frontier in the sense of a line defining the limit of Roman power. Second, it fails to work as an idea because there are at least one, and possibly two fortresses west of this line in the 40s AD – at Gloucester and possibly Wroxeter too (Hoffmann 2013: 78–79). For the Fosse Way to be a frontier, the fortresses should have been at the very least on its line or some distance behind it, part of the logistic support for an active campaign, as Nash-Williams had already argued. As Shotter has commented '[the Fosse Way Frontier] was not a statement of the limit of Roman authority, but, at most, a line of lateral communication which might serve as a convenient 'jumping off' point for further advance...' (Shotter 1996: 18). More interesting to my mind is the question of why the idea of a Fosse Way Frontier suggested itself in the first place to its author, Graham Webster. The idea of a linear but fluid defence designed to hold up attack through the use of strongpoints (in this case Roman forts strung along the Fosse Way) is reminiscent of the GHQ Stop Lines put in place to defend Britain in the case of invasion during World War Two (Kolonko 2015; Jones *et al.* 2008: 43–60). The point is worth considering because Graham Webster was employed as a military engineer during that war, although his known activity was largely in constructing airfields (Henig and Soffe 2002: 3). Given his role, he may well have been aware of the defence lines quietly established between June and August 1940, when the reality of invasion was at its gravest. Such defensive strategies could well have been in his mind when thinking about how the 'Fosse-Way Frontier' developed, but it is undoubtedly an anachronistic rationalisation of the fluid process of conquest.

Bearing these points in mind, we can now return to our current understanding of the Roman conquest of Wales. As noted, the Roman approach followed a normal pattern of Roman aggressive expansion (Guest's 'offensive frontier'). Importantly there is no evidence that once the Romans had landed on the southern coast of Britain that they

intended to stop until they had conquered the whole island. Naturally, the conquest took time and thus after each year's campaign, there were bound to be lines of advance that were consolidated at the end of each season. This was the situation that had been reached towards the end of the 40s when the advance into Wales was contemplated. The accumulation of evidence in the seventy years since Nash-Williams's work, and notably the contribution of aerial photography and detailed analysis of the numismatic and ceramic evidence from archaeology and the portable antiquities scheme, means that we now have a much more nuanced understanding of the Roman pattern of conquest in Wales. These knowledge gains are shown most clearly in the maps produced in the third edition of the *Frontiers in Wales* volume outlining the chronological development of Roman military control of Wales (Burnham and Davies 2010: 23–66).

Their first map demonstrates the situation in the pre-Flavian period (AD 43–68) with fortresses at Gloucester, Usk, and Wroxeter providing the support for a screen of campaign fortresses and forts in eastern Wales but with an emphasis on the south-east where the rebellious tribe of the Silures was located and whose campaign against Rome lasted until AD 74 (Figure 2a). Immediately after this positioning, the initial Flavian period (AD 70–80) saw the establishment of a new fortress at Chester (likely replacing an earlier fort in the same location; Mason 2012: 35–36; Burnham and Davies 2010: 172) alongside a dense network of forts connected by roads across the whole of Wales (Figure 2b). Classically, the forts control the valleys running through the highlands and are closely spaced, averaging about 30km/20 miles – a day's march apart – along the well-constructed network of roads. This pattern is broadly maintained for the next 40 years, c. AD 90–130, but then in the Hadrianic period the dense network is thinned to create broadly a cluster of forts in the south, in the centre, and in the north (Figure 3a). This network is thinned even further after AD 150 so that the forts are largely concentrated in the highlands of central Wales to control the routes into the more difficult terrain, and to hold the north coast and the economically vital island of Anglesey (Figure 3b). This reduced network is maintained for over two centuries, until the 370s (Figure 4b). After that time, the lack of reliable Roman coin dates and poor evidence for military activity in Wales suggests that the Roman army had officially ceased to exist as an entity in Wales (although this does not exclude any military replacement force under local control). In sum, for the earlier period we see a standard pattern for Roman conquest and control of any territory acquired by the Empire. The establishment of a baseline starting point, the use of that to rapidly overwhelm the region, and then the maintenance of a military presence for as long as necessary to quell any possibility of rebellion.

If we accept, therefore, that the conquest of Wales was territorially completed by the 80s and that the Roman army deemed Wales to be so completely subdued by c. 130 that its garrison could largely be removed, we can conclude that Wales was pacified and no linear frontier in Wales was necessary. It is a conclusion accepted by Burnham and Davies: 'That the majority of forts could be abandoned is surely indicative of the acceptance of Roman rule, however truculently.' (Burnham and Davies 2010: 54). This seems a paradoxical conclusion

Figure 2: Roman military sites in Wales. 2a (above): Pre-Flavian; 2b (below): AD 70–80; (after Burnham and Davies 2010, figures 2.3, 2.4)

Figure 3: Roman military sites in Wales. 3a (above): AD 110–130; 3b (below): AD 130–150 (after Burnham and Davies 2010, figures 2.8, 2.12)
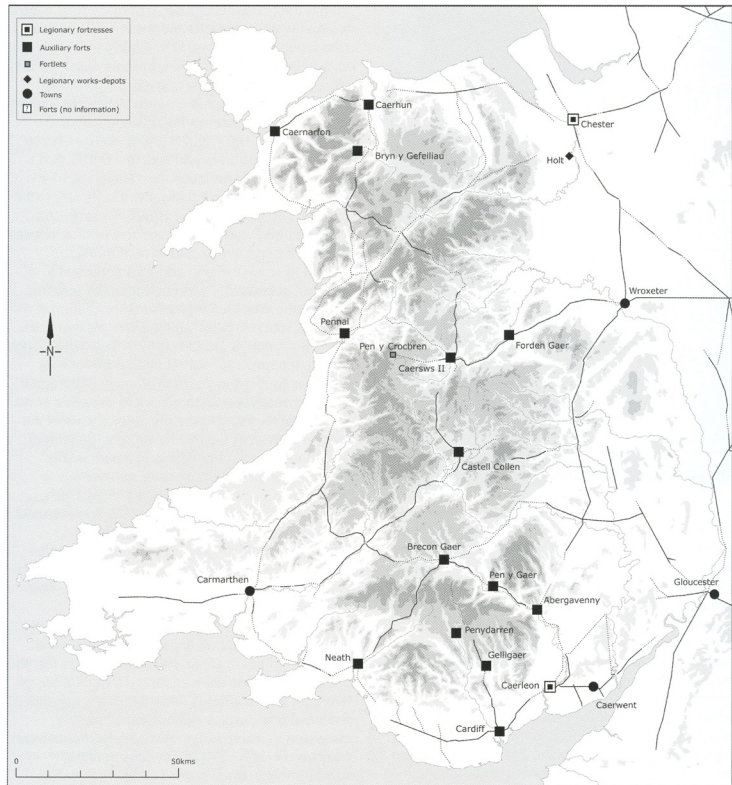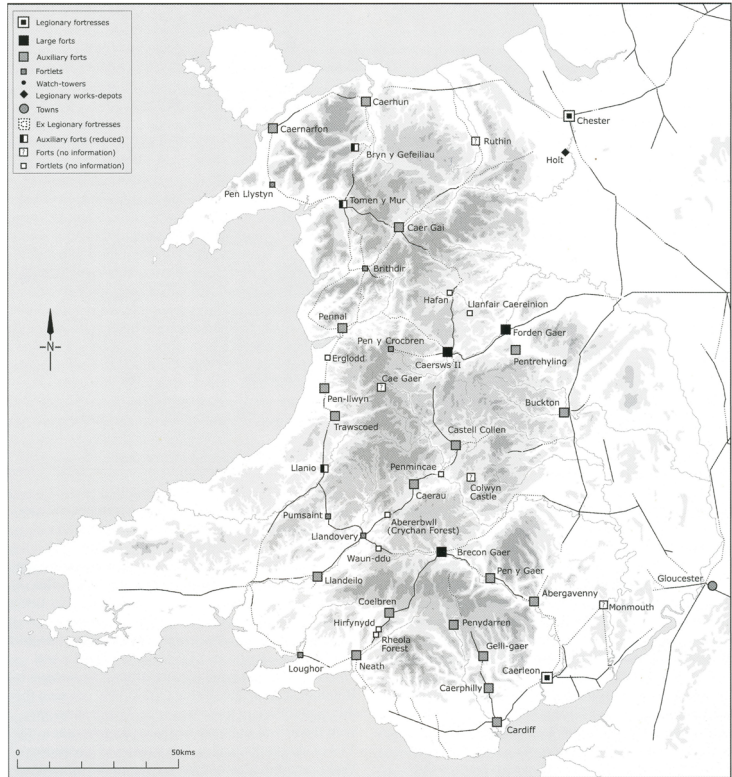
Figure 4: Roman military sites in Wales. 4a (above): AD 260–286; 4b (below): AD 364–370 (after Burnham and Davies 2010, figures 2.16, 2.20).

given that we have seen evidence for military occupation throughout the Roman period. The paradox is more apparent than real, however. A Roman military presence does not mean that the population was constantly rebellious. It was rather that the army's role became that of deterring attacks on the established civilian settlements, as well as providing the equivalent of a police force. In other words, in the absence of urban settlements, the forts provided the essential minimum of state control for administrative and judicial purposes and continued to do so until the demise of Roman power in Britain.

Paradoxically, during the third century, the need for a frontier to protect the by-then settled territory of Roman Wales emerged. It is made manifest in a number of new forts founded on the coast during the period of unrest and upheavals of the mid to late third century, most obviously at Cardiff, but also at *Segontium* (Caernarfon) where there was an internal reorganisation of the fort (Burnham and Davies 2010: 223, 230–233). Their location shows clearly that the threat was not from the population of Roman Wales, however truculent they were, but from external forces. Given the orientation of the Welsh coast, this can only mean a threat of attack or raiding from the peoples of Ireland with presumed targets of the lands adjacent to the coast, and specifically directed at the estuaries of the Severn, Dee and Mersey (Burnham and Davies 2010, 57; Figure 4a). This point is emphasised by further developments in the fourth century that saw the addition the fort of Caer Gybi on Anglesey that opened out directly to the sea implying a naval function, (Burnham and Davies 2010: 216–217) and the construction of Hen Waliau adjacent to *Segontium* that may have been a fortified stores compound (Burnham and Davies 2010: 233). The further provision for a series of coastal watchtowers along the coast of north Wales as far as the Dee estuary reinforce the sense of an early warning system reminiscent of the intentions implied by the Gask Ridge system of two centuries earlier (Mason 2012: 230–231; Hopewell 2018: 320–321). These fortifications are not mentioned in the late Roman document, the *Notitia Dignitatum*, the relevant section of that document likely being lost, but were presumably under a command commensurate with the contemporary east coast forts known as the Saxon Shore (White 2017). The existence of these forts, and their clear maritime orientation emphasises once more that the Romans certainly believed that all of Wales was under their control and, moreover, that it was worthy of protection.

The Romanisation of Wales?

While a fully nuanced understanding of the Roman conquest of Wales has only been readily available for just over a decade, the evidence of the Roman Army's presence has been obvious ever since antiquarians understood what a Roman fort looked like on the ground. In the uplands of Snowdonia or the Brecon Beacons, substantial earthworks of Roman forts survive in excellent condition as do the lines of Roman roads. At Cardiff, Colwyn Castle, and Tomen y Mur, Norman castles were erected within the circuits of these earthworks, a recognition in a later age of the value and strength of these earlier sites (Burnham and Davies 2010: 230–233, 241–242, 282–286). It is difficult, therefore, to understand why there might be a popular public perception that the Romans never

completely conquered Wales. Three reasons for this might be identified. The first is that the extant Roman sources give a strong prominence to the resistance to the conquest of Wales in the first century and inevitably that gives an impression of a longer and more sustained resistance than was actually the case. The second lies in a century-long portrayal of Britain as being divided into 'civilian' and 'military' zones (Haverfield 1912: 20 and fig 1; Millett 1990: 65) which until recently framed much of the traditional academic debate about Roman Britain. As we have seen, however, the military presence in Wales does not necessarily mean perpetual warfare, or rebellion. A third reason can also be suggested, one more rooted in debates about modern Wales and its people than an historical reality. The idea that native peoples accepted Roman rule is perhaps distasteful to modern thinking. Magnifying the early resistance of the native peoples to Rome offers a different and more palatable narrative for those in Wales who are conscious of and experience recent English domination and influence on Welsh politics, culture, and society over recent centuries and who wish to resist this legacy in Wales today. This reflects the ideas expressed in the song *Yma o Hyd*, quoted in the title, and the opening discussion of this article since it fits in with notions of mutual antagonism, imagined or real, between the English and Welsh nations, most obviously manifest in sport.

The focus in the written sources on resistance amongst first the *Silures* in south Wales and then the *Ordovices* in north-western Wales is well known and does not require detailed rehearsing here (excellent and brief summaries are provided by Nash-Williams (1954: 1–2) and more recently by Burnham and Davies (2010: 37–38)). The principal accounts derive from the works of Tacitus, writing at the end of the first century and into the early part of the second (Hoffmann 2013: 74–87). His works do not survive entire, and some lacunae are imperfectly filled by a later historian, Dio Cassius, writing a century after Tacitus and thus nearly 150 years after the events discussed. In the past, Tacitus' works have been treated as powerful, and accurate, testimony for Rome's actions in the invasion and conquest of Britain. So much so, that (for instance) considerable time and effort has been devoted to identifying the locations of battles based on matching archaeological discoveries and topographic detail to his prose descriptions (Jones 1991; Webster 1978: 111–112). This despite Henderson's caution that 'such efforts are almost always so subjective as to be valueless and are founded on the mistaken assumption that Tacitus was writing with a painterly concern for accuracy of detail.' (Henderson 1984: 25). The point has been made that Tacitus' writings are, indeed, so powerful that the temptation to use them to support particular interpretations of landscape and archaeology can lead to a largely circular argument (Hanson 1987: 20–21).

In this respect it is worth bearing in mind some caveats in considering Tacitus' evidence. While there is no need for him to have necessarily distorted the facts of the campaign, he did not witness the events he portrays, he never visited Britain, and he had ulterior motives in how he portrayed the people involved. Tacitus was above all concerned in his writings to show how tyrannical actions by emperors (by which he largely meant attacks on the senatorial class) had affected Rome's rule and the progress of its

conquests (Ogilvie and Richmond 1967). In this he was himself explicit: 'My conception of the first duty of the historian is to ensure that merit (*virtuus*) shall not lack its record and to hold out the reprobation of posterity to evil words and deeds' (*Annals* 3,65). Second, he wished to magnify the image of his father-in-law, Gn. Julius Agricola, who was governor in Britain from AD 77–84. The work *Agricola* is often called a biography: it is in fact a hagiography. Tacitus is again frank about his intentions: 'This book, which sets out to honour my father-in-law Agricola, will be commended, or at least pardoned, for the loyal affection to which it bears witness.' (*Ag.* 3). Thus, while we can be certain enough of the active resistance by the *Silures* over a period of three decades to the Roman invading force, and of the fact that they inflicted severe defeats at times, one reason why Tacitus tells us of Scapula's actions is to burnish his reputation as an honest and hard-working governor. One, indeed, who worked so hard that he died in office, 'worn out by his exertions' (*Ag.* 39.3). Despite this, his son, who is also mentioned by Tacitus in this campaign, was in the end forced to commit suicide by Nero – an honourable man forced to die by an act of tyranny (Birley 2005: 25–31). Equally telling is Tacitus' account of the governor in place before Agricola, Julius Frontinus. He is accorded only one sentence in Tacitus' *Agricola* (17.2) which at least credits him with the final defeat of the *Silures*, but no mention is made of the fact that he also campaigned with vigour in north Wales and northern Britain, founding the fortress at Chester, for example, as archaeology attests (Birley 2005: 68–70). But to magnify his account of Frontinus would be to diminish the actions of Agricola so the former's work is passed over in relative silence allowing Tacitus to amplify Agricola's impact on Britain.

My wider point here, however, is that the story of the heroic and sustained resistance of the *Silures* against Rome, and of the dramatic image of chanting druids defiantly resisting the massed Roman army on Anglesey's shore just before being massacred, hides a bigger truth. Once these episodes of resistance were broken, we do not hear again of the rebellious nature of the Welsh tribes against Roman rule. That might just be a question of the non-survival of historic accounts of the Roman occupation of Britain, but the archaeology shows a pattern of declining military engagement in Wales, as we have already seen. If there had been continuing, and determined, resistance to Rome we would have seen the evidence for this in the deployment of the army and the maintenance of the established network of forts. In fact, the more likely response to continuing resistance would have been an aggressive and devastating campaign by the Roman army, for which we have no evidence. The fact is that Rome scaled back its military establishments after about AD 130, and those troops that remained could be characterised as being there more to police than to pacify.

The problem with the Tacitean narrative is that because it is effectively the only written history we have for Roman Wales, it has been put front and centre of how Roman Wales is portrayed so that the thirty-year resistance against Rome shapes a narrative of resistance, albeit a largely passive one, that lasted three hundred years (Russell and Laycock 2011: 98–101; Cadw 2023). Thus, despite the earlier resistance of the tribe, the

successful development within Silurian territory of its civitas capital, at Caerwent (*Venta Silurum*), complete with forum and associated senate chamber, temples, bath house, and town houses encircled in the later Empire by still-impressive town walls is an inconvenient truth in the face of dismissals that Caerwent was 'never a successful town, covering an area of less than 18ha' while Carmarthen, the civitas capital of the *Demetae*, is caricatured as 'having the air of a pioneer shanty-town of the American mid-West' (Russell and Laycock 2011: 100). While Roman-period Carmarthen was indeed a small town, as it is still today a modest-sized conurbation, it nonetheless had its accoutrements of an amphitheatre and bath house and, more tellingly, was accorded the status of a civitas capital (Arnold and Davies 2000: 45–57). In the Roman Empire, the appearance and size of an urban centre were not the critical factors: its legal status was everything, as the Roman geographer Pausanias makes clear in describing the Greek city Panopeus:

> It is twenty stades from Chaeronea to Panopeus, a city of the Phocians, if anyone could give the name of 'city' even to these people, who have no official building for magistrates, no gymnasium, no theatre, no market place [i.e. agora or forum], no water collected in a fountain, but live in hovels, which most resemble mountain huts, here on the edge of the ravine. But nonetheless they have territory marked by boundaries with their neighbours and send representatives to the common council of the Phocians. (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.4.1)

Thus, Carmarthen's status made it as much a city as the even tinier St David's is today, and for the same sort of reason. Similarly, the small area occupied by Caerwent is not necessarily a comment on its success or otherwise – the civitas capital of the Iceni at Caistor-by-Norwich is even smaller, at 14ha (Millett 1990: table 6.4). Indeed, so Romanised had the *Silures* become by the early third century that they were paying for and erecting a statue to the local legionary legate based at Caerleon who had just been promoted by the Emperor to govern the province of *Gallia Lugdunensis* (RIB 311; Tomlin 2018: 243–244, 274–279).

This false narrative of continual resistance by the tribes is also used as part-explanation for the lack of Romanisation over much of Wales. While it is widely acknowledged that in southern Wales, within the territory of the *Silures* especially, there was a high degree of Romanised settlements spreading from the Gwent levels to the foothills of the Brecon Beacons and, to a degree, west to Carmarthen (Arnold and Davies 2000: 73–87), elsewhere in Wales there is a perceived failure of Roman settlement, and in particular a lack of villas and other Romanised buildings. Such conclusions fail to take into account the more recent discoveries made under the provision for archaeology as part of the modern planning process and notably the contribution made by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Brindle 2016: 363; Reynolds 2022: 59–78). It also neglects the evidence for substantial civilian settlements (*vici*) outside many of the forts found all over Wales that demonstrate the active engagement of the people with the Roman presence (Figure 5; Burnham 2017).

Figure 5: Distribution map of known *canabae* and *vici* (after Burnham 2017, figure 5)

The interpretation of this perceived lack of Roman settlement relies heavily on the highly influential characterisation of Roman Britain by Francis Haverfield into a 'Civil' south and east of Britain and a 'Military' west and north (Haverfield 1912 figure 1; Rippon *et al.* 2015: 19–30), largely reflecting the division between lowland and highland zones of Britain that was also recognised by Sir Cyril Fox in his later work *The Personality of Britain* (Fox 1932). As has been noted, 'some see this [absence of Roman-style settlements] as a mark of native resistance to Roman blandishments' (Arnold and Davies 2000: 65) but more nuanced explanations are surely called for.

The first and most obvious point to make is that Wales is not a unity in terms of its geomorphology and terrain; some areas are more suited to arable, others to a pastoral

economy whilst even today, everyone is aware of just how difficult it is, say, to travel from north to south Wales, and vice versa (Rippon *et al.* 2015: 294–304, figure 11.1). This has a direct impact on how people live and use landscapes regardless of the overarching political system. Pastoralists require more land and tend towards more isolated, small communities with less surplus; arable agriculture is more encouraging of denser settlement and regular surplus value that is convertible into, for example, prestige building (Sylvester 1969). We can see this in the variety of agricultural production and settlement in pre-Roman Wales, and it continues through the Roman period and beyond. Also, the difficulty of movement through this landscape will naturally lead, in times before modern systems of communication, to isolated communities perhaps resistant to change. Despite these caveats, archaeology is now finding increasing evidence for Romanised settlements, both rural and urban, in the so-called 'military' areas of Wales. These include a villa at Abermagwr near Aberystwyth (Davies and Driver 2018; Brindle 2016, fig. 11.18) and a second at Rossett near Wrexham (Pudney and Grenter 2021). Further examples include small-scale urban settlements at Plas Coch, Wrexham (Jones 2011) and Tai Cochion on Anglesey (Hopewell 2016; Hopewell 2018 Brindle 2016, fig. 11.4) as well as rectilinear buildings on many settlements including at remote locations on Graeanog Ridge in the Llŷn peninsula and at Din Lligwy on Anglesey (Hogg 1969; White 2007: 136–141; Reynolds 2022, 77, fig.6.16). Thus, the model of a military and civilian division in Wales seems simplistic at best.

How else can we explain the 'failure' of Romanisation within Wales if we accept that the population was not hostile to Roman power? This is a question that we had to answer in the Wroxeter Hinterland Project too, in a landscape that is not too dissimilar to that in Wales and with a similar cultural background to the peoples of Wales. Our answer to that conundrum was two-fold, and I would argue is transferable to the broadly similar situation in Wales (Gaffney and White 2007: 279–286). The first is that 'Romanisation' itself is a modern concept – it was never a policy implemented by the Romans who were in fact largely indifferent to whether people adopted Roman customs and ways of life or not. The second point follows on from the first. If peoples did not engage with Roman culture or beliefs, that was not necessarily hostility: it could well be indifference born of a lack of necessity.

It is worth reiterating at the outset that Romanisation was never a policy of the Romans themselves. There was no compunction to become Roman and if peoples chose not to engage in Roman culture and society then the state would not coerce them into doing so. As Mary Beard has remarked:

> the Romans had neither the manpower nor the will to impose the kind of direct control and cultural uniformity that the *Asterix* model imagines. Their priorities were more often money and a quiet life. Provided the natives paid their taxes, did not openly rebel and, where necessary, made a few gestures to Roman cultural norms, their lives could – if they wished – continue much as before (Beard 2014: 278–279)

The exceptions to this were if there were an active, aggressive attack on Roman authority – rebellion was not tolerated and would be dealt with swiftly and severely. Equally, while there was almost complete religious freedom, and an acceptance of, and engagement with, native cult beliefs and practices, the Romans would not tolerate religious practices that directly offended their own religious sensibilities or practices, or that they saw as subversive of Roman rule. This was the root of their direct intolerance and suppression of the druids, since it was understood by the Romans that they practiced human sacrifice, which was forbidden under Roman religious law (Beard *et al.* 1998: 233–234). The same argument, and approach, was adopted by the Romans when dealing with Christians as there was a misunderstanding of the nature of the host in the act of communion, the pagan authorities characterising it as an act of cannibalism (Beard *et al.* 1998: 225). It is easy to see from these instances how a poor understanding of the religious practice of a relatively closed community such as the druids, or early Christians, might lead to bans and persecution.

A second point is the too easy equation between the use of Roman goods and an acceptance of Roman ways of life. Does the fact that people were using glass vessels or Roman pottery mean that they identified as Romans? Not necessarily if in all other aspects their way of life seems to have been unaffected by Roman rule (Russell and Laycock 2011: 121–122). Some in Wales undoubtedly adopted Roman ways of life and could evidence this in their housing, as (famously) at Whitton, Glamorganshire (Jarrett and Wrathmell 1981), or more self-evidently in their clothing or grooming habits seen in the adoption of tweezers and manicure sets (Reynolds 2022: 113–129), or in contributing to a statue base to some local worthy in their nearest town, as well as less demonstrably in learning Latin. One suspects, however, that those who used more functional Roman material culture, such as pottery or glass (Reynolds 2022: 132–142), did so because it was available, or had manifest advantages, or had aesthetic qualities that they appreciated but did not necessarily equate any of this as 'being Roman' any more than our use of abundant material culture designed in the USA and made in the People's Republic of China makes us American or Chinese, or even means that we identify with the values of either country. In other words, one can argue that rural populations especially were indifferent as to who ruled them, so long as they as rural people were allowed to get on with their own lives and did not feel that, for example, the tax burden was so great that they could not afford to make a living. One might also make the observation that adopting Roman fashions in clothing, appearance, language, and all the other facets of life would be unlikely if it were being done in isolation. Most people wish to 'fit in' with those around them and feel more comfortable if not standing out in society. It seems likely, therefore that the greatest feeling that most people living in rural Wales in the Roman period will have felt was indifference towards Rome (Russell and Laycock 2011: fig. 16). Rome itself was happy with this, so long as people paid their taxes.

Indifference, however, is not the same as rejection. Rejection is an active choice, a specific denial of a way of life (for example by becoming a monk or nun). It is a choice often made by those who are living in a particular way, but then decide that they no longer wish to continue to participate or have been pushed into a situation where they feel they have to

react; the rejection of the Hijab by young women in Iran from September 2022 is a very modern example of such resistance through dress code (Al Talei *et al.* 2022). In a place like the Roman Empire (and modern Iran for that matter), this was a risky thing to do, especially if you were poor and had no-one interested in protecting you. It is a situation that Jews found themselves in during the Empire. While they lived with the reality of Roman rule for centuries, in the end they rebelled so strongly and so often that they were exiled by the Emperor Hadrian from their homeland: they chose their faith and culture over becoming fully Roman (Goodman 2007). This is not what we see in Wales and to characterise the evidence for the continuation of native patterns of life from the Iron Age into and through the Roman period as 'rejection' is over-stating the case (Russell and Laycock 2011: 21–22) since it may instead be indifference. While we must be cautious not to take absence of evidence as evidence of absence since there is a real issue of visibility of buried archaeology in upland Wales, villas were rarely built in north Wales not because people hated Rome, but because the economic model of pastoralism did not provide the surplus to do so, even if you wished to. Nor is it easy to see how the required builders and materials would be made available in places remote from centres of Roman activity, such as forts and towns. A more nuanced position has been adopted by Mattingly who has characterised this diversity of response to Roman values as 'discrepant experience' which he defines as 'the co-existence of very different perceptions of history, culture, and relationships between coloniser and colonised' within the Empire (Mattingly 2006: 17). This interpretation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how peoples reacted to the cultural influences of the Roman state in relation to their own perceptions of their cultural traditions.

One final observation is that presenting the native peoples of Roman Wales as unwilling participants in Empire can in some ways be seen as a proxy for modern Welsh attitudes to English power exercised in Wales. This view has a long history. As early as the Edwardian Age, the peak of the British Empire, Haverfield wrote that: 'Still more recently, the revival of Welsh national sentiment has inspired a hope, which has become a belief, that the Roman conquest was an episode, after which an unaltered Celticism resumed its interrupted supremacy' (Haverfield 1912: 19). This view would see the Roman occupation of Wales as a brief and distasteful interlude in the history of a nation that was Celtic before, and after, Rome so that there was in essence an unbroken continuity of Celtic identity in Wales. The presentation of Wales as a resistant nation thus chimes in with how German nationalists, for example, presented their defiance and conquest of Roman power, as expressed in both the Varian disaster in AD 9 and the Batavian revolt of AD 69–70 (MacGregor 2014: 124–128). This is a view that, however, does not bear scrutiny when looking at the late and immediate post-Roman period in Wales.

The Roman influence in Wales after Rome

While it is impossible to be certain of what happened in the fifth century and later in Wales, or for that matter in much of England too, it is difficult to justify a position that sees the emergence of polities in Wales as a purely Celtic/native phenomenon, i.e.

simply a re-awakening of tribal identities that had survived unchanged from the Iron Age and through the Roman period. The early medieval kingdoms of Wales were localised within the *civitas* boundaries in the Roman period, but this is more an expression of the micro-geography of Wales than it is a re-assertion of Celtic identity. These kingdoms were firmly rooted in a Roman past (Charles-Edwards 2013: 15–21, 314–318). Even if one accepts that the tribes of Wales recorded at the time of their first encounter with Roman power actually existed in the form that they have come down to us, a view that is not universally accepted (Moore 2011: 346–349), to believe that the Iron Age tribes of Wales had reinvented themselves in their same territories would be to accept that the Roman period in Wales of nearly 400 years' duration had no measurable impact at all, an implausible situation, even in those areas where Rome's imprint seems minimal.

The evidence for the early medieval period throughout Wales is that the response to the relinquishing of Roman power in Britain was for the peoples of the *civitates* of Wales to seek to defend themselves and crucially to maintain and project a continuing Roman identity, not a native one (Charles-Edwards 2013: 40–44). As Charles-Edwards puts it 'What is not true is that the Britons ceased to give their allegiance to a Roman Emperor … Even Roman taxes were preferable to Anglo-Saxon conquest.' (Charles-Edwards 2013: 42). Since the early third century, all peoples living within the Roman Empire had been made Roman citizens, a mechanism to make sure that everyone paid taxes to the state, but also a confirmation that, after more than two centuries of Roman rule across the Empire, the old distinction between the Roman citizen and non-citizens was no longer appropriate. No-one alive in early fifth century Wales will have remembered anything other than a fully Roman identity, held in conjunction with a tribal identity. This is expressed, for example, in the fifth century tombstone of Corbalengus, an Ordovician (but with an Irish name), buried at Penbryn, in the territory of the *Demetae* (Charles-Edwards 2013: 176, ill.4.1). The direct connection to a Roman, rather than a purely native, past can be seen in two distinct and inter-related elements of the emerging Welsh nation.

The first, as noted, is that our earliest evidence of the emerging Welsh polities is the expression of identity in tombstones. In some, the use of Roman titles is prominent. The best-known example is that of the tombstone of Voteporix found at Castelldwyran, close to the Roman road to Carmarthen, who is styled *Protictoris*, a variant of the Roman title *Protector* which in the early post-Roman period is likely to have been an honorary title (Charles-Edwards 2013: 174–175). While the title is in Roman terms meaningless, it is nonetheless a Roman title, not a British one. The second, and connected point, is that these tombstones commemorate Christians. Christianity was above all at this date an expression of a Roman identity, as the writings of St Patrick, Gildas, and of Prosper of Aquitaine demonstrate (Charles-Edwards 2013: 226–228).

The adoption of Christianity, evidenced from the fifth century onwards by tombstones in Latin, argues at the very least for a Latin (and possibly Greek) literate stratum of society that was in contact with Rome, while the use of Latin titles for those in power

in parts of post-Roman Wales demonstrates awareness, however dimmed, of Roman power structures, and a wish to engage with them (Petts 2014). At settlements like Caerwent, where one might expect resistance to Roman power to have survived longest given the prolonged struggle of the *Silures* against Rome in the first century, the evidence is for a determined survival of Roman culture into the post-Roman period, expressed clearly in cultural material and burial practices (Knight 1998). I have argued elsewhere that the very fact that Roman Wales was not swiftly conquered in the fifth or even sixth century, as much of the rest of Britain was, was an outcome of a post-Roman British determination to preserve an identity that, far from being purely British, had a substantial overlay of Romanitas (White 2007; Charles-Edwards 2013). While some aspects of this narrative are difficult to substantiate or corroborate, the survival of Wales and the emergence of a Welsh identity during the Early Middle Ages is proof that the defence was successful. For the emerging Welsh, this tradition was reinforced by their own historical and cultural traditions. Thus, the Pillar of Eliseg apparently records a direct connection with Roman power through a transferal of rule from the usurping Roman Emperor, Magnus Maximus, in 383 to the king of Powys. The inscription does not survive today but antiquarian records have preserved an interpretable record of it showing that it gives an account of the lineage of the kings of Powys, and a statement of the extent of their power. As Edwards notes: '...lines 20–26 are clearly linked. They are concerned with Magnus Maximus, the Roman usurper, his links to the British ruler Guarthigirn and his family and the Powys saint Garmon, and they appear to take us back to the origins of the Kingdom of Powys in the late and sub-Roman period as they were perceived at the time of Concenn' (Edwards 2009: 165–166). This lineage was, however, not confined to the kings of Powys since the tradition of this transfer from Magnus Maximus to other Welsh rulers is recorded in other kingdoms too (Dumville 1977: 179–181; Charles-Edwards 2013: 37). The actual historicity of this hand-over of power is irrelevant: it is what was believed in the eighth and ninth centuries at least and was important enough to be inscribed so that it could, in Edwards' view, be recited at appropriate occasions, such as the accession of a king (Edwards 2009: 168–170). The rulers commemorated had successfully resisted the incursions of the Mercians, and perhaps neighbouring Brittonic kingdoms, into what was perceived to be the territory of Powys and the placing of the monument exerts a strong statement within the landscape as a concrete expression of ownership and rights.

The reason why such assertions were necessary is not only because the Mercians and others were attacking the Welsh kingdoms; the emerging English kingdoms too were laying claim to a Roman inheritance, especially so after their own conversion to Christianity and the adoption of the Roman rite (Charles-Edwards 2001). Their churches were increasingly linked to Roman buildings that must still have been all too visible in the landscape; their kings were appropriating surviving Roman forts and ruins for their own purposes (Bell 1998; Ray and Bapty 2016: 323–325; Carver 2019: 37–38). This was inevitable, but also a necessity in that, unlike the Welsh kingdoms, 'the Mercian kings of the Middle Angles, recorded from only the seventh century onwards, inherited little (if anything) in the way

of functioning imperial institutions' (Nelson 2001: 127). In this they differed not only from the Welsh, but also the Franks who could lay claim to an official connection to a hand-over of Roman power in the late fifth century through their links with the last remnants of Roman military authority and aristocracy, and their conversion to Catholic Christianity (James 1991). Thus, Offa's connections with the Carolingian court of Charlemagne suggest a relationship that was far from equal, even though Offa clearly tried to assert his desire to be seen, at least in some sense, as Charlemagne's 'brother' ruler (Nelson 2001). It is perhaps in this context that we can view Offa's choice to express the materiality of the difference between Mercia and Powys, between the English and the Welsh, in the form of a dyke. A monument of this type, a substantial bank and ditch echoing the form of the Antonine Wall, and the many Roman forts then even more prominent in the landscape than now, was an expression of power projected in a Roman fashion, especially so in the scale and ambition of the work (Ray and Bapty 2016: 342–344). It was an assertion of Offa's right to be considered as Roman in his scale of achievement, a potent answer to the continuing resistance of the emerging Welsh kingdoms at whom the dyke was targeted.

Coda

Whilst researching, thinking, and writing this article, I realised that the relationship between the Welsh and their Roman past is changing. This struck me first when I heard of, and saw the words to, *Yma o Hyd* – We are still here – during the joyous qualification of the Welsh Men's Football team to the FIFA World Cup of 2022. It is not often you come across a modern song naming a Roman Emperor, even if he was a usurper.

The thrust of this article is to move the narrative of Roman rule in Wales from one of resentful resistance to oppressive Roman rule, which I would argue is a response to Edwardian Imperial attempts to wipe out Welsh culture, as Haverfield's comment shows and as Hingley discusses (2016), to the defiant pride that the immediate post-Roman British had in what they created in what we now call Wales, perhaps a reflection of the new-found twenty-first century confidence in nationhood that devolution has fostered. You could argue, after all, that the Romans taught the native peoples of Wales to come together as one people, united increasingly by their developing language (Charles-Edwards 2013: 75–115) but also by the common culture of the Roman world and its new religion, and conscious of their place in it. The growing sense of Welsh identity emerging from the universal identity of the 'British' of the Roman period, separate and distinct from the emerging English as well as from the neighbouring Irish, Cornish and other peoples was reinforced by the creation of Offa's Dyke inasmuch as it was seen as a monument built against the local power of the Welsh kingdoms (Ray and Bapty 2016: 338–340). Offa's Dyke, along with the coastline of Wales, created an isolation that only enhanced the idea of Wales and its people as being distinct from their neighbours, fostering perhaps some of the defiance (and pride) reflected in the words of *Yma o Hyd: Ry'n ni yma o hyd. Er gwaetha pawb a phopeth* / We are still here, in spite of everyone and everything (Thomas 2022).

Acknowledgements

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