



Impact of the Romans on the Locality



Before the Romans came, the area around Gelligaer was in the centre of the territory of an Iron Age tribe called the Silures. They were not an easy tribe to conquer.

"... Julius Frontinus was, so far as a subject of the emperor could be, a great man, and he shouldered and sustained the burden cast on him: his arms reduced the Silures, a powerful and warlike race; he surmounted not only the valour of the enemy but also the physical difficulties of their land." (Tacitus Agricola xvii.2)

Once they had been subdued, the Romans generally treated them as they did the residents in other parts of the Empire. As with other defeated groups, the Romans declared the tribal lands to be forfeit. They also made heavy demands on raw materials and food supplies. However, their warlike resistance may explain why the granting of self-governing civitas status was slow in coming.

Many ordinary people, however, did not find their lives changing that dramatically – many of them still lived in traditional round houses and continued farming using age old techniques. The changes were far greater for those at the top of society.

Administration

The Roman used local leaders as their administrators (e.g. magistrates). Administrative centres were set up for the different tribal areas. This meant that prestige and social importance was really a gift of the Romans which tended to make the leaders more co-operative.

According to Dr. M. Ibenji, *"Rome controlled its provinces by bribing the local elite. They were given power, wealth, office and status on condition that they kept the peace and adopted Roman ways. If you took a Roman name, spoke Latin and lived in a villa, you were assured of receiving priesthoods and positions of local power."*

Trade and Industry

Celts had traded with merchants from other lands before the Roman invaders arrived. The Celtic leaders copied their Roman masters and so imported luxury items such as Roman wine, jewellery and the latest fashions in pottery. Items that were exported included tin, cattle, grain and hunting dogs. Among the local industries that flourished were potteries and iron-making.



Plants

The Romans have been credited with introducing a huge variety of plants – many on purpose and some accidentally with seeds being carried on shoes and clothing from other parts of the Empire. Many of the plants that still grow around Gelligaer today were originally introduced by the Romans. This had a big impact on diet and farming.

Roman Roads

Joining the forts and the towns together were the Roman roads, one of which passed through what is now Gelligaer. People assume that all Roman roads were straight but in many parts of Wales (and other areas of Britain) that wasn't a realistic option. When we speak of a "*highway*" it was literally true – raised up partly on the materials dug from the ditches that ran along their edges. It should be remembered, however, that many of the Roman roads followed the route of earlier roads built by the various local tribes.

Towns

As well as encouraging towns near army bases, they liked the Celtic leaders to build town houses and even created towns basically for retired soldiers. The main civilian town in the tribal area was Venta Siluria (Caerwent). Although towns were so important to the Romans, there is no evidence of a large urban settlement close to Gelligaer although there probably would have been an informal civilian vicus near the fort. These vici were civilian villages of shops, houses and workshops built as close to the fort as the local commander would allow. They supplied goods and services not normally catered for in the military regime.

Generally speaking it was in the towns that civilian Roman pleasures such as public baths and entertainments were to be found. It was also within about ten miles of the towns that the largest villas (farms) were to be found. In practice, villas were primarily the homes for the more rich Romanised native population. Many of these had the famous Roman "*central heating*" and were sometimes highly decorated (e.g. mosaics).

Women

Woman generally had less freedom and fewer legal rights under the Romans than before their arrival. Under the law, their main duties were to have children and raise them. They lived under far more restrictions than the men – it was even illegal for them to drink wine. The Romans found the role of Celtic women quite hard to understand. They commented on their strength and ferocity but also recorded the fact that they acted as mediators and judges in military and political disputes. They also served as diplomats on occasions and, such evidence as there is, certainly suggests that they could become Druids.

Food and drink

Many new foods were introduced by the Roman but what one ate depended a lot on one's place in society. Fish dishes were very popular including the use of the famous sauces called garum and liquamen – the main ingredients in which were fermented fish guts! It is also generally accepted that the Romans introduced such meats as chicken and several game birds. They also imported deer. These new items became part of the local diet over time.

Within Gelligaer fort, there were two granaries for storing the grain that formed an essential part of a soldier's diet. Beyond that, we cannot be certain what the soldiers in Gelligaer ate but from other sites we know that soldiers carried with them bacon, hard tack and a kind of sour wine. While settled in forts we also know they ate beef, ducks, shell-fish, mutton and a variety of vegetables as well as local wild animals including moles, voles and beavers. They also developed a taste for beer!