

Chapter 1 Social Order Maintenance in Celtic & Roman Britain

Objectives

- Understand and describe how social order was maintained in Celtic Britain
- Understand and describe how social order was maintained in Roman Britain
- Understand that the Celtic philosophy of punishment was community based involving fines, restitution, deterrence and rehabilitation
- Understand that the Roman philosophy of punishment was based on imprisonment, hard labour and the death penalty.

Celtic order maintenance

Studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers suggest that hunting has significant social effects. It helps to foster a binding relationship within the group. As nomads, hunter-gatherers need to carry their possessions with them; this mobility limits acquisitiveness and excessive competition. Contemporary groups are comprised of between 30–50 individuals, a number that appears to minimise social tensions within the group and to have little or no adverse impact on the environment. There is a body of opinion that argues that before human societies grew far beyond these numbers, with their eventual enlargement into tribes and states, kinship and the need for cooperation acted as a strong social deterrence against criminal activity.

Celtic peace keeping arrangements were also based on cooperation and the ties of kinship and centred on the tribe and the village. The Celts had a highly developed sense of the rights and duties, familial and tribal, of every member of their society. Raiding was a major feature of Celtic life and was probably endemic throughout Europe. A Celt could enhance his status by engaging in acts of prowess, demonstrating leadership abilities, courage and acquiring booty for distribution to his followers. Whilst raids would initially have been carried out on near neighbours, eventually those seeking greater status and rewards would have travelled further afield. It is possible that bands of marauding Celts who carried out raids in England eventually returned as settlers, the first immigrants from Northern France colonising Sussex, Dorset and Wiltshire and introducing a settled farming economy. The predatory behaviour of different tribes would have served to strengthen ties of kinship and the willingness to cooperate amongst members of village communities. Although the Celts were portrayed as barbarians by the Romans, their culture was based on honour rather than acquisitiveness. To the Celts, warfare was a matter of honour; they were not concerned with abstract notions of centralised power and authority. For them personal honour, the honour of kin and clan were what mattered, and under the influence of the Druids, battles could be decided by single combat, which in itself might be violent and bloody, but served to prevent many deaths and lingering feuds. Far from being barbarians, the Celts were already practising a nascent form of chivalry.

The effective social unit in Celtic society was the kin. Land was not owned by an individual but by the kin. It was through the kin that the law was enforced and

redress obtained. The kin of contesting parties were responsible for maintaining rights and obtaining settlement.

Each person within society, with the possible exception of non-status individuals (prisoners of war or those who had infringed the rules of society), had an honour price directly related to their material wealth, which gave a physical indication of his dignity. The honour price was directly related to compensation in respect of wrongs committed. Social divisions in society were becoming evident.

In addition to the ties and duties of kinship there existed the institution of client-ship. Client-ship was basically a social contract in which the freeman provided armed support and fulfilled other obligations to his lord. In return he enjoyed protection and material support whilst retaining his freedom and independence. Among the ruling classes fostering was practiced, this involved the placing of some of the male children with neighbours, usually of higher rank, thus ensuring that close bonds of loyalty were formed.

Punishment within the community is not a new concept, together with fines it was being practised more than two thousand years ago. The maintenance of the law was not dependent upon any central authority but rather on ritual and popular acceptance. The threat of sanctions, such as loss of status and exclusion from religious rites and community involvement was a potent factor in upholding the law.

Roman order maintenance

It was Roman policy to “Romanise” their neighbours. The Celts of Britain had been exposed to the influence of Rome and the Mediterranean for some considerable time as a result of trade. In 55BC a military expedition under Julius Caesar penetrated scarcely ten miles inland from the straits of Dover. Caesar returned to Britain in 54BC with a much larger force which was victorious in several battles and crossed the Thames in



the face of strong Celtic opposition. The Romans penetrated into the territories of the Catuvellauni dealing a severe blow to the prestige of Cassivellaunus, the dominant king in southern Britain. Envy of the dominance of the Catuvellauni coupled with a healthy respect for Rome’s formidable army caused not only rival tribes but some of the tribes subject to the Catuvellauni to seek alliance with Rome by agreeing treaties, binding them to the protection of Roman interests against hostile tribes. The economic development of those areas peopled by tribes hostile to Rome suffered adversely, whilst those tribes who had sought peace by the agreement of treaties enjoyed expansion of their commercial links with the Roman world and increasing access to luxury goods such as Mediterranean wines. Compliance with the laws of society were now based on a mix of fear and personal gain.

It was the emperor Claudius who launched the invasion of Britain in 43AD. After conquest it was the aim of Rome to delegate the burdens of local government as soon as practicable to the native population. Subject states, like free states, retained their own laws as long as there was no conflict with the law codes of Rome. It was the aim of Rome to delegate the burdens of local government as soon as practicable to the native population. The Romans tended to think in terms of communities of people rather than in gains of territory which gave rise to a desire to deal with cities. Where no cities existed they set about establishing them as their preferred method of political control. In Britain the old tribal centres were encouraged to become regional urban capitals. This policy of Romanisation was followed consistently by successive Governors, the policy of military subjugation was not quite as consistent.

After the death of King Prasutagus the Romans had attempted to seize this client kingdom but his widow Boudicca resisted. The Romans responded by flogging the Queen and raping her daughters. This unwarranted abuse of force and insult to the Iceni unleashed their fury and that of their neighbours the Trinovante of Essex, resulting in excess of 150,000 unnecessary deaths. The Roman city of Colchester was overrun and destroyed.

Petillius Cerialis with Legion IX Hispana rushed to meet the Britons in battle, his infantry were cut to pieces, and with his cavalry he was forced to beat a hasty retreat to the Roman fort at Longthorpe near Peterborough. The rebels sacked St. Albans and London and seventy thousand were put to death amid torture and savage mutilation. The defeat of legion IX Hispana was to attract merciless retribution. London and St Albans were abandoned to their fate as indefensible. A pitched battle in the Midlands resulted in the slaying of eighty thousand Britons by the army of Gaius Suetonius Paulinus. Boudicca committed suicide by taking poison and Paulinus sparing no one set about punishing the rebels and neutral tribes alike.

The new procurator Julius Classicanus intervened to prevent further uprisings. Following an imperial inquiry Paulinus was removed from office. A substantial number of Britons had favoured Rome in 43AD but very many were alienated in the years that followed as a result of wholesale confiscation and plunder and the corrupt practices of some Roman officials.

When Paulinus came to Britain as Governor (58-59AD) he was accompanied by the nineteen year old military tribune Julius Agricola. As a result of his experiences with Paulinus, Agrippa had clearly learned lessons about winning hearts and minds as a means of maintaining order. A reasonable picture of order maintenance in Britain during the governorship of Agricola, who returned as governor in 78AD, can be gained from the biography written by his son in law Tacitus.

