A list of Britain's Tribes by Roman geographer Ptolemy

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| Caledones (Caledonii)This is the name of peoples who lived in the Scottish Highlands and Islands.The Romans used the word Caledones to describe both a single tribe who livedin the Great Glen between the modern towns of Inverness and Fort William.They also called all the tribes living in the north Caledonians. We know thenames of some of these other tribes. They include the Cornovii and Smertaewho probably lived in Caithness, the Caereni who lived in the far west ofthe Highlands, the Carnonacae and the Creones in the Western Highlands. The Vacomagi lived in and around the Cairngorns. Other unknown tribes livedin Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides. Warriors from many of these tribescame together to resist the Romans under a leader called Calgacus at battleof Mons Graupius in AD 84. Although the Romans won this battle, they neversuccessfully conquered the Highlands. The Romans admired the Caledonii fortheir ability to endure cold, hunger and hardship. Tacitus described them asred-haired and large-limbed.All these tribes lived very different lifestyles than neighbouring peoplesin other parts of Scotland. In many areas they lived in tall stone towers,called Brochs, or other fortified sites, called Duns. Unlike the Taexali andVenicones, the Caledones rarely made religious offerings of fine metalobjects. TaexaliLittle is known about this group who lived in what is today Grampian, exceptthat the people lived in small undefended farms and hamlets. They sharedmuch with their neighbours the Venicones to the south.These low lying andfertile parts of eastern Scotland provide archaeological evidence fordifferent types of settlement and rituals compared to those of the Highlandsand Islands to the west and north.Although the Taexali were defeated by the Romans in AD 84, they were neverpermanently occupied. Like the Venicones and Caledones, they lived beyondthe northern most frontier of the Roman Empire; the Antonine Wall. CarvetiiThis tribe lived in what is today Cumbria.They are a poorly known group which were made into their own civitas (anadministrative units or 'county') in the Roman Province. There is verylittle archaeological evidence for the people who lived in this area beforethe Roman Conquest.Like their neighbours, the Novantae, these peoples probably lived in smallfarms and did not use coins or have big hillforts.The Carvetti might have been a smaller tribe within the large kingdom orfederation of the Brigantes. VeniconesThis tribe lived in what is today Tayside.The Roman army campaigned several times in the territory of this people, butthey were never permanently conquered and occupied. The archaeologicalevidence shows that this people and their northern neighbours, the Taexali,had much in common.The Venicones were one of the few groups in northern Britain at this timethat buried their dead in stone lined graves, such graves and cremationburials are very rare in other parts of Britain before the Romanperiod.Archaeologists suspect many Iron Age peoples often practised complexfuneral rituals in which bodies were naturally allowed to decompose.The Venicones and Taexali also made offerings of prestigious decoratedlocally made metal objects in bogs and lakes, including massive bronzearmlets.Only the Venicones and Taexali wore these unusual ornaments, whichcould weigh over 1.5 kg each and were worn one on each arm.  EpidiiLittle is known about this mysterious tribe except that they lived in themodern region of Kintyre and probably the islands of Arran, Jura and Islay. DamnoniiThis is the tribe or people who lived in the central part of Scotland aroundwhat is today Glasgow and Strathclyde.The name of this tribe could be spelt either as Damnonii or as Dumnoniialthough theDumnonii is also the name of the people who lived in Devon andCornwall at this time.Many tribes in Britain and France at the time of theRoman Conquest shared similar names which may have been as a result ofinter-tribal contact. It could, however, be coincidence, as people usedsimilar types of names for themselves such as 'the people of the mountains','people of the horn' or 'the brave people' etc.The Damnonii were conquered by the Romans and for many years their territorywas occupied by the Roman army before they retreated further south to theline of Hadrians Wall. NovantaeThe Novantae were a little known tribe or people who lived in what is todaysouth-west Scotland.The people living in this area did not build massive forts on the tops ofmountains, as did the Votandini, nor did the make many offerings of finemetal objects.Like their neighbours to the south, the Carvetii, archaeologists have foundlittle evidence for the lives of these peoples before the Roman Conquest.They were clearly farmers and herders, but few of their farms and othersettlements have been excavated by archaeologists so far. SelgovaeA British tribe of Scotland, the name is thought to mean 'hunters'.The Roman geographer Ptolemy places them in the Southern uplands ofScotland, although it is not clear from the little evidence we have as toexactly where this people lived. Some scholars place their location as theupper Tweed Basin, and it is unclear if they were part of the Votadini. The Selgovae might have used Eildon Seat as their principal settlement, butthis might have been a Votadinian site.Like the Votandini, they were conquered in AD 79-80 by the Roman army. VotadiniThe Votadini were a very large tribe or people that lived in the south eastof Scotland. In the north, their territory started at Edinburgh and theFirth of Forth and stretched as far south as Northumberland in northernEngland. It is not clear where the boundary between the Votadini and theother large tribe, the Brigantes, was, although it probably frequentlyshifted as a result of wars and as smaller tribes and communities changedallegiances.The Votadini, like the Brigantes, were a group made up of smaller tribes,unfortunately the names of these smaller tribes and communities remainunknown.Archaeologically, the territory of the Votadini was very different to thatof either theVenicones or the Novantae. Large walls, banks and ditchessurrounded most of their farms and the people made offerings of fine metalobjects, but never wore massive armlets.There are also at least three very large hillforts in their territory(Yeavering Bell, Eildon Seat and Traprain Law), each was located on the topof a prominent hill or mountain. The hillforts may have been used for over athousand years by this time as places of refuge and as places for meetingsfor political and religious ceremonies. BrigantesThis large tribe was, like the Votandini, a federation of smallercommunities. The name means 'upland people' or 'hill dwellers'. This name isvery appropriate as the Pennines formed the heart of their territory.After the Roman Conquest, the Brigantes were formed into a very largecivitates, or administrative unit that covered most of Yorkshire, Cleveland,Durham and Lancashire. It stretched from the North Sea to the Irish Sea. Weknow the names of some of the smaller tribes they made up the Brigantes atthe time of the Roman Conquest. They include the Setanti in Lancashire , theLopocares, the Corionototae and theTectoverdi around the Tyne valley. Thishuge area was very varied. As well as people living in the Dales and hills,many people farmed the fertile land in Durham, Tyneside and Teeside. At thetime of the Roman Conquest people in this region wore swords carried indistinctive local metal scabbards that were highly decorated.An important centre for the Brigantes was built at Stanwick in NorthYorkshire in the first century AD. This was probably the capital of QueenCartimandua who ruled theBrigantes. Cartimandua was friendly towards theRomans, but her husband was anti-Roman. The Romans invaded and occupied theterritory in AD79. ParisiThe Parisi lived in East Yorkshire. They were a small, but distinctive groupof people who farmed the chalk hills of the Yorkshire Wolds. The Parisishare their name with the people who lived in France around what is todayParis although whether both tribes shared strong links is hotly debated. TheBritish Parisi are known for their unusual 'chariot-burials' and cemeteries.Unlike other people living in Britain between about 300 and 100 BC, thepeople in East Yorkshire buried their dead in large cemeteries. This wasmuch like the way many peoples in France and Germany buried their dead atthe same time. However, in other respects, the East Yorkshire Parisi livedin British style houses, wore British style ornaments and used British stylepottery. At the time of the Romans, the Parisi had stopped burying they deadin this unusual way. However, the carried on other distinctive styles oflife and remained separate from their large, powerful neighbours,theBrigantes. After the Roman Conquest they were made into their own smallcivitas with their capital at Petuaria (modern Brough on Humber) CornoviiThe Cornovii are a surprisingly obscure tribe, given that they lay wellwithin the boundaries of the Roman province and their civitas capital,Wroxeter, was one of the largest in Britain. They share their name with aCaledonian tribe who lived in the far north of Scotland. The name probablymeans 'people of the horn'. There is no reason to think that this groupshared any common ancestry with the group in Caithness.Many tribes or peoples in Europe at the time of the Roman Conquest sharedsimilar names. This might be because these tribes had contacts with eachother. But it is just as likely to be a coincidence, as people used similartypes of names for themselves such as 'the people of the mountains' or 'thebrave people' etc. The Cornovii never issued coinage and before the RomanConquest left little evidence to recognise them. They probably lived in whatare today the modern counties of Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire. DeceangliThe Deceangli, the Ordovices and the Silures were the three main tribegroups who lived in the mountains of what is today called Wales. However, inprehistory Wales, England and Scotland did not exist in anyway asdistinctive entities in the ways they have done so for the last 1000 years.The Deceangli were the peoples of what is today north Wales and probablyincluded the peoples who lived on the Isle of Anglesey.The Romans considered Anglesey, or Mona as they and the locals at the timecalled it, as a stronghold of the Druids. Because the Druids played animportant role in encouraging the recently conquered Britons to resist theRoman Conquers, the Roman army specifically targeted Anglesey fordestruction. On the eve of Boudicca's revolt in what is today East Anglia,the Roman Army has only just completed the long and difficult task ofconquering the tribes living in the Welsh Mountains. The final episode ofthat conquest was the invasion of Anglesey and the slaughter of the Druidsthere. OrdovicesThis group covered much of the mountains and valleys of what is todaymid-Wales. They were the northern neighbours of the Silures and the Southernneighbours of theDegeangli.Like the Silures and Degeangli, these peoples lived in small farms, oftendefended against attack. After the emperor Claudius invaded southern Englandin AD 43, one of the main leaders of the Britons, called Caratacus escapedto the Ordovices and theSilures. They were stirred into rebellion byCaratacus and for a long time successfully resisted the Romans.The Roman general Agricola only finally defeated the Ordovices in 77-8. Thetribe was incorporated into Britannia and became a civitas (anadministrative district). CorieltauviThis large tribe appears to have been created only shortly before the RomanConquest of Britain. It offered no resistance to the Romans and was quicklyturned into a civitas (an administrative district equivalent to a moderncounty) with its capital at the city of Leicester.The Corieltauvi combined groups of people living in what is today most ofthe East Midlands (Lincolnshire. Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire,Derbyshire, Northamptonshire). Before about 50 to 1 BC, archaeologicalevidence suggests two different groups or tribes lived in this region. Onelived in what is today Lincolnshire, the other in what is todayNorthamptonshire. Both areas were different to each other and were importantcentres of population and economy in the period c. 400 and 100 BC.The Corieltauvi are known from their coins that are found throughout theEast Midlands. This group appears to have been a new federation that unitedearlier different groups. This was a region were people lived in villages,and some times larger settlements. Leicester was certainly an importantlarge settlement before the Roman Conquest, as were a number of largesettlements in Lincolnshire, such as Dragonby and Old Sleaford. IceniThis was another tribe that issued coins before the Roman Conquest. Theircoins and other archaeological evidence shows that the tribe's territory wasin the modern counties of Norfolk and parts of Suffolk and Cambridgeshire.They appear to have been a wealthy and powerful group of tribes between 200and 50 BC.From their territory come the finest hoards of gold treasure found in IronAge Britain; the Snettisham torcs. Other hoards of elaborately decoratedbronze chariot fittings point to a love of conspicuous display by the noblesof the Iceni. This tribe also shunned contacts with the Roman world and thechanges they brought with them that characterised the life styles ofCatuvellauni and Trinovantes at this time.The Iceni had important religious centres at Snettisham and at Thetford. Butwhen they were made into Roman Civitas, the Romans did not choose either ofthese centres, but the settlement at Caistor, near what is today Norwich.Was this because the Iceni led the most successful revolt against Roman rulein the history of Roman Britain? When the Romans invade southern Britain inAD 43 the Iceni were friendly towards the new rulers. Their king Prasutagusbecame a client-king of Rome. But on his death the kingdom was incorporatedinto the Roman province and together with other abuses led to the Icenianrevolt led by Prasutagus' widow, Queen Boudicca. DemetaeThese were the people who lived in the fertile lands of Pembrokeshire andmuch of Carmarthenshire in southwest Wales. They lived in small farmsscattered across the countryside and shared many features of their liveswith their neighbours across the Bristol Channel in Devon and Cornwall. Theywere friendly towards the Romans and quickly adapted to Roman rule, unliketheir more warlike and scattered neighbours in the mountains of Wales; theSilures and the Ordovices.Because of this the Demetae did not need to be intensively garrisoned by theRoman army, except along their eastern border, which may have been toprotect them from their hostile neighbours, the Silures. The tribe wasincorporated into the province of Britannia and became a civitas (anadministrative unit, or county, within the Roman province). The capital ofthe Roman civitas was at Carmarthen (Moridundum Demetarum). CatuvellauniThe Catuvellauni were the tribe that lived in the modern counties ofHertfordshire, Bedfordshire and southern Cambridgeshire. Their territoryalso probably included tribes in what is today Buckinghamshire and parts ofOxfordshire. The tribal name possibly means 'good in battle'.The Catuvellauni existed as a tribe at the time of Julius Caesar, but in thefollowing years became an extremely powerful group. Their first known kingwas Tasciovanus, who is known from the coins he minted with his name onthem. He founded a royal and ritual centre at Verulamium, modern St Albansin about AD10. There were several other large settlements or clusters ofvillages in their territory, such as at Baldock and Welwyn.Before this time, the Catuvellauni, Trinovantes and Cantiaci were verydifferent from other British tribes. They had been using coins for at leasta century, adopted the same way of burying the dead as was practised innorthern France, and eat and dressed in ways more common in France thanother parts of Briton. Tasciovanus successors created a large kingdomthrough conquest and alliance that included the Trinovantes andCantiaci.The most successful king was Cunobelinus (Cymbeline), but after his death inthe late 30's AD, his kingdom was beset by rivalries between his successors.This was the excuse used by the Roman Emperor Claudius to conquer southernBritain in 43 AD. TheCatuvellauni were one of the most pro-Roman of Britishpeoples who very quickly and peacefully adopted Roman lifestyles and Romanrule.A very rich grave of a pro-Roman Catuvellaunian ruler who lived at the timeof the Roman Conquest has been excavated at Folly Lane, St Albans. Theybecame one of the first civitas in the new province, Verulamium becoming oneof the first and most successful cities in Roman Britain. SiluresSeveral Roman authors including Pliny, Ptolemy and Tacitus mention thistribe and later civitas (administrative unit in a Roman province). Theirterritory was south east Wales - the Brecon Beacons and south Welsh valleys.A people of the mountains and valleys, we know relatively little about howthey lived.Like the other tribes of the Welsh Mountains, they were difficult for theRomans to conquer and control. For a time in the period around AD 45-57,they led the British opposition to the Roman advance westwards.Tacitus describes them as a strong and warlike nation, and for ten years ormore the Romans fought to contain, rather than conquer them. Althoughdefeated and occupied by the early 60's, their bitter resistance may explainthe late grant of self governing civitas status to them only in the early2nd century. The capital was established at a previously unoccupied site atCaerwent and was given the name Venta Silrum. Tacitus described them asswarthy and curly-haired, and suggested their ancestors might be from Spainbecause of the similarities in appearance with some peoples in Spain.However, there is no evidence to suggest any genetic links between southWales and parts of Spain. DubunniThis large tribe lived in the southern part of the Severn Valley and theCotswolds and were one of the few groups to issue coins before the RomanConquest. The main distribution of these coins shows that the Dubunnioccupied or ruled an area as far south as the Mendips, and the coins alsohint that the group was divided into northern and southern subgroups.The Dubunni lived in very fertile farmland in farms and small villages. Theydid not resist the Roman Conquest, unlike their neighbours, the Silures.Indeed, they may have been one of the first tribes to submit to the Romans,even before the Romans reached their territory. The Dubunni had a central orimportant settlement at Bagendon in Gloucester, on the eastern edge of theirterritory. This centre was replaced by the important Roman city ofCirencester, which became the capital of theDubunnic civitas after the RomanConquest. DumnoniiThe Dumnonii were the British tribe that occupied the whole of the SouthWest peninsula and parts of Southern Somerset. They did not use coins, nordid they have large settlements to act of political centres for the tribe,and there is no evidence for a dynasty of Dumnonian kings.The Dumnonii were probably a group of smaller tribes that lived across thelarge area of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. The people lived in smallfarmsteads, usually surrounded by large walls, however, there were alsolocal differences in the types of settlements and other aspects of lifebetween different parts of Devon and Cornwall. There is also evidence forcontacts and trade with Brittany with whom they shared similar styles ofhighly decorated pottery. Cornwall was one of the few parts of Britain wherethe dead were buried at this time.The Dumnonii appear to have accepted the Roman conquest without resistanceand as a result few garrison forts were placed in their territory, althoughthis area never fully adopted Roman ways of life.Life styles and types of settlements remained little changed from the IronAge through the Roman period. The Romans granted them civitas status and thetown of Exeter (Isca Dumnoniorum) was their administrative centre. DurotrigesCentred in Dorset, this people were also found in southern parts ofWiltshire and Somerset and western Dorset. This was a people that minted andused coins before the Roman Conquest, but there is no evidence from thecoins or burials for a strong dynasty of kings. Rather the Durotriges seemto have been a loosely knit confederation of smaller tribal groups at thetime of the Roman conquest. One of these smaller tribal groups that livedaround Dorchester, buried their dead in inhumation cemeteries.A unique feature of the Durotriges at this time was that they still occupiedhillforts. Although hillforts are one of the most well known features of theIron Age, most were no longer occupied at turn of the first millennium. Bestknown of these Durotrigeanhillforts is that of Maiden Castle nearDorchester, others include South Cadbury Castle and Hod Hill.A major trading centre existed at Hengistbury Head from which cross-channeltrade with Gaul was controlled. This may be the settlement called Dunium byPtolemy which was located on the border between the Durotiges and Atrebates.Cross channel trade was not an important source of goods for the Durotriges,who preferred local products.A particular type of pottery made at Poole Harbour was traded through outthe territory of the Durotriges. At the time of the Roman invasion theDurotriges put up a spirited, if unsuccessful opposition and they are almostcertainly one of the two tribes that Suetonius records fighting againstVespasian and the 2nd legion. After the conquest they were made into acivitas with their capital was at Durnovaria (Dorchester) in the mid-70's.Later a second Durotrigean civitas was created, administered from Lindinis(Ilchester). BelgaeThe Belgae were probably not a British tribe. The Romans applied the nameBelgae to a whole group of tribes in northwest Gaul, but the appearance of acivitas of this name in Britain is something of a mystery.According to the Roman geographer Ptolemy the territory of the Belgaeincluded not only Winchester but also Bath nearby and an as yet unidentifiedsettlement called Ischalis.It seems likely that Ptolemy has made an error here since the resultingshape of the territory of the Belgae would bear little resemblance topre-Roman tribal geography and would be something of an administrativenightmare. If the civitas was actually focussed around Winchester (called bythe Romans Venta Belgarum - 'town of the Belgae') there is still a problem,since this area seems to have been part of the old kingdom of theAtrebates.The civitas of the Belgae was therefor most probably an artificial creationof the Roman administration, like the neighbouring civitas of the Regni, andwas created at about the same time in c. AD 80 following the death of KingCogidubnus. Its administrative capital at Winchester was known as VentaBelgarum, which was an important settlement before the Roman Conquest. AtrebatesThis is another British tribe that shares a name with a tribe in pre-RomanFrance. They were the second most powerful group in southern Britain at thetime of the Roman Conquest, they issued and used coins, and had manycontacts with France.They probably consisted of a group of tribes ruled by a single dynasty,their territory originally stretched from what is today West Sussex,Hampshire and Berkshire.After the Roman Conquest, their territory was divided into three separatecivitates, one such centre was at the major settlement at Silchester, nearReading.Another major Royal centre, comparable to those at St Albans, Colchester andStanwick, was at Chichester. The Atrebates had long links of trade withFrance and it is likely that people from the Atrebates were related bymarried to people from French tribes. Commas, a French leader from theFrench tribes called the Atrebates, fled to Britain during Julius Caesar'sconquests of Gaul. Commius then appears as the name of theAtrebates ruler.From about 15 BC, the Atrebates seem to have established friendly relationswith Rome, and it was an appeal for help from the last Atrebatic king,Verica, which provided Claudius with the pretext for the invasion on Britainin AD 43. After the Roman Conquest, the territory of the Atrebates wasdivided up, with Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum) becoming the capital of aRoman civitas that administered the area of modern Berkshire, Oxfordshire,Surrey and north Hampshire.The name Atrebates means 'settlers' or 'inhabitants' RegniLike the civitas of the Belgae, the Regni are not a tribe or people known atthe time of the Roman Conquest, rather the Romans created this civitas (anadministrative unit within a Roman province), possibly around a smallertribal group that were part of theAtrebates.Before the Roman Conquest, the whole of the territory between what is totoday West Sussex, Hampshire and Berkshire was the territory of theAtrebates, this important kingdom had two major centres at Silchester, nearReading, and Chichester.West Sussex was an area with very strong links to France before the RomanConquest and was one of the first areas to use coins and adopt north Frenchstyles of cremating the dead.Between about 10 BC and AD 43, Chichester became an important Royal centre,on a par with St Albans, Stanwick or Colchester. This area was verypro-Roman and served as one of the bases for the Roman Conquest of Britain.The ruler of the area was King Cogidubnus, who started the great palace atFishbourne, outside Chichester, after the Conquest.Because of his help to the Romans, Chichester at least remained a clientKingdom and not part of the new Roman province until Cogidubnus' death inabout 80 AD. After this time, the territory of the Artebates was divided upinto three civitas, with the Regnibeing the civitas centred on Chichesterand administering West Sussex. CantiaciThis is the name of the tribe or people who lived in north and east Kent.Like other peoples in southeast Britain at the time of the Roman Conquest,this group was very open to influences from France and the MediterraneanWorld and they eventually became part of the large kingdom of Cunobelinus.Like the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes they buried their dead according tothe north French custom of cremation.After the Roman Conquest they became a civitas based on their principlesettlement at Canterbury. TrinovantesThe Trinovantes are the first British tribe to be mentioned by a Romanauthor, appearing in Caesar's account of his invasion of 54 BC. By this datethey seem to have been already involved in a power struggle with theneighbouring tribes to the west who were to be forged into the kingdom ofthe Catuvellauni under Tasciovanus. This group shared the same ways of lifeand religious practices as the Catuvellauni and Cantiaci.They used coins, cremated their dead, ate from plates and drank from cups,They became part of the large kingdom established by the rules of theCatuvellauni.The king Cunobelinus essentially absorbed the two tribes into one largerkingdom and he or his predecessors, established Colchester as a new royalsite on the same model as St Albans. It was Colchester, that became thetarget for the Roman Emperor Claudius' invasion in AD43.After the Roman Conquest, the Trinovantes were restored as tribal entity inthe form of a civitas (an administrative unit or county) within the newRoman Province. The capital of the civitas was the Roman city of Colchester,which was originally founded as colony for retired Roman soldiers.The albionClaudius Ptolemy Born c. AD 90 Egypt Died c. AD 168 (aged 77-78)Alexandria,Egypt. Occupation mathematician, geographer,astronomer, astrologer..  |

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