

## Ancient Dumnonia.

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THE question of the geographical limits of Ancient Dumnonia lies at the bottom of many problems of Somerset archæology, not the least being the question of the western boundaries of the County itself. *Domnonia*, *Damnonia* and *Dumnonia* are variations of the original name, about which we learn much from Professor Rhys.<sup>1</sup> Camden, in his *Britannia* (vol. i), adopts the form *Danmonia* apparently to suit a derivation of his own from "Duns," a hill, "moina" or "mwyn," a mine, which is surely fanciful, and, therefore, to be rejected. This much seems certain that *Dumnonia* is the original form of *Duffneint*, the modern *Devonia*. This is, of course, an extremely respectable pedigree for the Western County, which seems to be unique in perpetuating in its name, and, to a certain extent, in its history, an ancient Celtic kingdom. Such old kingdoms as "*Demetia*," in South Wales, and "*Venedocia*" (albeit recognisable in *Gwynneth*), high up the Severn Valley, about which we read in our earliest records, have gone, but "*Dumnonia*" lives on in beautiful Devon. It also lives on in West Somerset in history, if not in name, if we mistake not.

Historically speaking, we may ask where was *Dumnonia*? and who were the *Dumnonii*? Professor Rhys reminds us

(1). *Celtic Britain*, by G. Rhys, pp. 290-291.

that there were two peoples so called, the one in the South West of the Island and the other in the North,<sup>2</sup> resembling one another in one very important particular, viz., in living in districts adjoining the seas, and, therefore, in being maritime. This resemblance or peculiarity tends much to the elucidation of the character of the race. Sir Francis Palgrave would localise a colony of the Dumnonii in Armorica, and these, also, would be noted for their aptitude for sea pursuits.<sup>3</sup>

Camden has raised the question of the origin of the Danmonii or Dumnonii, and speculates as to whether they might not have come from the neighbourhood of Uxantissa, *i.e.*, Cape Ushant. Leaving this knotty point in ethnology, we may consider the Dumnonii of South-West Britain alone, and, even here, our information is very scrappy. In his geographical description of Britain, Claudius Ptolemæus (*c.* A.D. 150), placed the Dumnonii next to the Durotriges, “longissime versus occidentem.” Amongst their towns he mentioned Volida, supposed to be Fowey or Falmouth, on the West, and Uxella on the East. Where is this Uxella? In a note from Müller’s edition of Ptolemy we read—“Uxelis—George of Ravenna, p. 424-18. Urbs ab Uxellae fluvii ostio longe separata . . . quodsi fluvius est Axe Uxella forte est Axebridge.” Apparently “Uxella” is here taken as the Latin form of the Somerset Axe. The Latinisation of these Celtic river-names is sometimes puzzling. The Usk is Isca, *i.e.* Isca Silurum; The Exe is Isca, *i.e.* Isca Dumnoniorum; and here the Axe is Uxella. Moreover, it must always be remembered that there is more than one Axe for the confusion of Roman Britain.

If we accept this placing of the Somersetshire Axe or Uxella, then Axbridge, or some port on the Axe near it, must have been a border Dumnonian port, and the Valley of the Parret would have been included in Dumnonia. Apparently

(2). Celtic Britain, p. 291.

(3). English Commonwealth, p. 382.

the chief town of the Dumnonii was "Isca Dumnoniorum," *i.e.*, Exeter, a kind of Dumnonian metropolis. There, according to Mr. Kerslake,<sup>4</sup> in Saxon times, both Britons and Saxons settled down in one community. From Falmouth, however, to Axbridge was one kingdom, according to Ptolemy, covering the two modern counties of Cornwall, Devon and part of Somerset, as far East as Mendip, and as far South, in all probability, as the Valley of the Parret, which would be no great distance from the Foss way, if we take the limits of the tidal overflow and the ancient morasses of Mid Somerset. We should feel inclined to add to Dumnonia such a strong coast fortress as Worlebury Camp, beyond Weston-super-Mare, considering the maritime character of the Dumnonii.

Upon the side of the Severn Sea, the "Uxellæ æstuosum" would be the estuary of the Axe at Brean Down, not the Parret mouth, with which, it appears, it has often been confused. The fact seems to be that after the creation of Glastonbury the channel of the Parret became a principal feature, both in history and tradition, and, with the gleam of sanctity upon its waters, monopolised the vision of mankind. It became an ecclesiastical definition, as we gather from the expression, "Archdeacon of beyond Parret," used in a Twelfth Century Eton College Confirmation, by Robert, Bishop of Bath, apparently corresponding to the present Archdeaconry of Taunton, and in the Calendar of Patent Rolls, to prove it was a civil boundary, we read (May 1, 1311), of the "Bailiwick and Sergeantry of East side of Parret." This river also became the main trade approach as Brug Walter, or the Bridge of Walter rose in importance, and a Royal Castle was built to guard the passage. We might mention also the old passage across the river by the White House, lower down by Comwich, used within living memory and mentioned by Warner in his "Walks." In Camden the mouth of the Parret is called Evel Mouth, taking

(4). S.A.P. vol. xx, pt. 2, p. 9.

its name from the Ivel, and those who thus named it may have known the Ivel first. But the mouth of the Axe, commanded on the East by Worlebury Camp, was the first trading port developed by and developing the mineral wealth of the Mendips, the first and most important industry of the land. One port of Glastonbury was by way of the Axe, and by the Axwater, the *aqua salsa* of the river, a port the Abbot claimed by ancient and immemorial right, as we learn from John of Glastonbury, in a reported law-suit with the King. The Abbots connected the Axe with the Brue by means of the canal known as the "Pill Row Cut." After merchandise was brought up to the Axwater it was doubtless conveyed in barges, *i.e.* "batellis," to "Glaston's Isle." It is a little difficult to replace the ancient prestige of the Parret as a highway and as a boundary, and push the line of ethnical and trade development back to the Axe, but, when we reflect about it, a high hill and a forest, as the Mendips once were, constituted a more true and permanent demarcation than a River Valley which encouraged dispersion on this side and on that.

The conquest of Dumnonia and of the Dumnonii by Rome is an almost unrecorded chapter in our annals, unlike that of the Silures, on the opposite coast, about which we learn so much from Tacitus. Before Cæsar came to Britain he had to vanquish the Armorican Sea Confederacy, and there is every reason to suppose<sup>5</sup> that the Dumnonii, being a seafaring people, were members of that notable Confederacy. This would be *c.* B.C. 50, so the existence of the Dumnonii as a distinct people by the Severn Sea goes back a long way. Richard, of Cirencester, the great topographer of Roman Britain in the Fourteenth Century, writes :

"Towards the South and bordering on the Belgæ and Allobroges dwelt the Dumnonii, the most powerful people of these parts (*gens omnium validissima*), on which account

(5). See Elton's *Origin of English History*.

Ptolemy assigns them all the country extending into the sea like an arm. Their cities were Uxella," (a note says probably near Bridgwater), "Tamara Voluba, Cenia and Isca, the mother of all, situated upon the Isca (Exe). Their chief rivers were the Isca, Durius (Dart), Tamarus and Cenius (Falmouth). It is affirmed that the Emperor Vespasian fought 30 battles with the united forces of the Damnonii and Belgae."

Where these battles were, even tradition does not tell us, but, probably, if the Belgae and Dumnonii united their forces some of the most important of them might have been along Mendip or in South-East Somerset, on the supposition that the Romans advanced upon Somersetshire from the South and South-East. On this point their Itinera and the line of the Foss trackway and the Mendip road may help us. It is possible that Richard of Cirencester, who was a "helluo librorum" in the Fourteenth Century, wrote from authorities and traditions now lost to us. The alliance of the Dumnonii with the Belgae suggests the ethnical point whether they were by extraction identical with them or in any way akin to them, or, another alternative, considering their alliance with the Veneti, were they closer to these? Strabo throws some light upon this matter by saying that the Veneti were Belgae,<sup>6</sup> and perhaps therefore the Dumnonii, Veneti and Belgae all owned to a similar racial parentage. If there was any great difference between these two branches it was brought about by their occupations, and especially by "the kinship of the sea." It seems a little strange that Cæsar, in his well known and stereotyped classification of the tribes of Gaul, *i.e.*, into (1) Belgae, (2) Aquitani, (3) Celts or Galli, differing from one another, "lingua, moribus, legibus," did not add a fourth division, *viz*: of the Veneti and their Sea Confederates, the Nannetes, Morini, Menapii, etc., etc., who first opposed him, and who asked for aid from Britain, "auxilia ex Britannia."

(6). Lit. iv., vol. 1, p. 271.

Here, surely, were a distinct sea-faring folk with strongly marked characteristics of their own, making themselves always felt down the pages of history. To Britain with her nautical and naval traditions this particular strain of seamen, differing from the mere pirates and sea-rovers, should be more interesting than any other. The Dumnonii in their particular way, together with the Veneti, represent a long-forgotten chapter of peaceful sea enterprise in the Severn Sea, which must have affected the coasts of North-West Somerset as well as South Devon. With regard to the distinction of races by their place of abode and by their occupations—a very real one in remote history when details are wanting and records are scarce—one is reminded of the old Attic division in the days of Solon, of the *Pedieis*, the dwellers along the plains; “*Diacrii*,” the dwellers in the hills; the “*Paralii*,” the “Men of the Sea-Coast.” This is a common-sense classification, and more illuminating in our own annals, if applied to them, than those names of fugitive dynasties and insignificant reguli.

Through the lack of materials in our early British history, we borrow our ideas of the ancient Britons almost entirely from Cæsar’s description of the men who fought against him by *land*, and leave out of sight the Dumnonian sailors who fought against him by sea, together with these Veneti. But besides the “*Essedarii*” or chariot-fighters there were the British sailors, “the first line of defence” in Cæsar’s time as now, whom it was necessary to conquer before the legionaries could be landed on the shores of Kent.

Although widely scattered about along miles of shores and estuaries, these “Men of the Sea-Coast” have more in common than those Celtic clans or septs whose fortresses and hill mounds were separated by deep and trackless forests. The men of the sea would develop a kind of nautical parlance of words and phrases, a “*lingua Franca*” passing current amongst the fishermen and “*pilots major*” of the Isles. That the sea traditions of the Veneti, and, naturally we may

suppose of their allies, the Dumnonii, lasted long we may gather from a remark in *Spelman's* "Life of King Alfred." With regard to the ships made by the King it was said that "they resembled the ships of the Veneti, with which Cæsar fought, both in their size and in the height of their poops." This tradition had lasted over 900 years. As to the shipwrights, we have Warrington's authority that King Alfred "engaged in his service many Welshmen acquainted with the art of ship-building, whom he afterwards appointed superintendents of his dockyards, and afterwards employed in honourable positions in his fleet."<sup>7</sup> The Dumnonii of North-West Somerset would naturally share in this sea-going skill, the intercourse between the Parret and Axe on the one hand and the Usk and the Severn on the other being such a notable feature in the history of the race, almost at every early stage. Giraldus Cambrensis, on the question of language, has noted that "in the Southern parts of England, and particularly in Devonshire (Dumnonia), the English language bears more marks of antiquity than it does elsewhere, and adheres more strictly to the original language and ancient mode of speaking, a positive proof of which may be deduced from all the English works of Bede, Rhabanus and King Alfred, being written in this idiom."<sup>8</sup> It is pleasing to think that "the well of English undefiled" may be located in the West country and in "ancient Dumnonia." Later on, may we not add Geoffrey Chaucer, of Petherton, and therefore West Somerset, fame?

We may conclude, generally speaking, that the Dumnonii were a self-contained people, rather different from the tribes of the Forest and the deep interior of ancient Britain. Their seas and rivers gave them breathing spaces, quick coast communication, far quicker and easier than inland trackways, and so they developed maritime and commercial tastes. Such tastes

(7). History of Wales, vol. 1. p. 215.

(8). Descriptio Walliæ.

have surely passed on to West countrymen of more modern times, whether living in Cornwall, Devon, or North Somerset. Formerly, as a result of this quicker coast intercourse between such extreme ports as Fowey and Uxella (Axbridge), the Dumnonii acquired a better and more uniform civilisation. Of the Britons who lived near the Valerium Promontory and around the tin districts of Cornwall, Diodorus Siculus, writing about the time of Cæsar Augustus, has left it on record that they were more hospitable to strangers than the rest. This is a better character than that of the pirates and the Viking brood of later times.

Caius Julius Solinus (A.D. 401-450) mentioned the Dumnonii and says that a rough strait, *i.e.*, the Severn Sea, divides what he terms the "Island of the Silures" in South Wales from the shores inhabited by the Dumnonii. The Silures were certainly high up the Severn Sea, and in order to be opposite to them in any strict sense of the word we must locate the Dumnonii higher up the channel than the longitude of the present county of Devon. In fact we must take in part of the North coast of Somersetshire.

Gildas (A.D. 546), writing from the Island of Steep Holms, if we may credit Caradoc of Lancarvan, and the accepted tradition,<sup>9</sup> rebuked in his "*Liber querulus*" two evil princes on either side of the Severn Sea. One was a certain Constantinus "*Dumnonia tyrannicus*," the other "*Vortipore Demetarum tyrannus*."

In A.D. 601, a Rex Domnoniæ gave the land which was called Inis Witrin to the Abbot Worgrez, so we learn from the *Gesta Regum* of William of Malmesbury, but who that King was the antiquity of the charter prevented his knowing (*Vetustas scedulæ scire negat*). Still he was a "*Rex Britannicus*," he argued, because Glastonbury is called Inis Witrin, the old Celtic naming. Worgrez also sounds like a Kelt. Dr. Edwin Guest has given good reasons for supposing

(9). S.A.P., vol. xxvi., p. 23.



that this King of Dumnonia was Gurgantus Magnus, a Prince of great power on both sides of the Severn Sea, in Glamorgan, Monmouth, and in Somerset.<sup>10</sup> If this be so, that portion of West Somerset including the Parret Valley would have constituted no unimportant section of Dumnonia, and, having regard to the easy communication by water between South Wales and Somerset, there is every reason to agree with Dr. Guest's surmise and believe that a Rex Domnoniæ could consolidate a Riverine Kingdom on both sides of the Severn Sea.

Here, indeed, appears the outlines of the Arthurian realm which, if it had its heart and life-blood anywhere, had it up the valleys of the Usk and Parret, at Caerleon and at Glastonbury. The Kingdom of "Rex Arthurus" was essentially a Sea Kingdom, and lived in the mouths of men along the coasts and at the ports of the Celtic race. Because it was a Sea Kingdom and because its fame was bruited about by the imaginative and poetical Celtic sailors, therefore, it may be, many fables and wonders grew up around it. "Celtica" had its imaginative being in many places, in Armorica, Hibernia, the Isle of Man, and in many a remote "loch," and "Celtica" must needs have its national dreams and hero-worship. Some, indeed, have localised that famous battle of Llongporth (A.D. 520), celebrated by Llywarch Hen when Geraint was slain, the captain of King Arthur, at Langport.<sup>11</sup> If so, this battle may be regarded as one of the great conflicts of Dumnonia, before these kingdoms fell under the onslaughts of the Saxons. It is in the vicinity of Langport and at the very edge of the tidal overflow of the Parret, in those distant days, that we might look for the site of such a contest. The Saxons came up from the South and established themselves at such places as Somerton, South Petherton and Ilchester, before their advance upon the coastal regions of the Severn Sea.

(10). Arch. Cambr. vol vii., 3rd Series.

(11). S.A.P., vol. iv., pt. ii, p. 44, and Turner's A.S. Hist., vol. i., p. 271.

Lappenberg, in his "England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings,"<sup>12</sup> writes: "In the South-West we meet with the powerful territory of Dumnonia, the Kingdom of Arthur. Dumnonia, at a later time was limited to Dyvnaint or Devonshire by the separation of Cernou or Cornwall. The districts called by the Saxons that of the Sumorsaetas, of the Thornsaetas, and the Wiltsaetas, were lost to the Kings of Dyvnaint at an early period."<sup>13</sup> This is probably true, and the germ of the early Saxon Somerset was laid around Somerton. The first Saxons here were called Sea-mere-saetas, the dwellers of the sea mere. But the coast regions of North-West Somerset and the valley of the Parret were destined to be ere long a notable "additamentum." They were doomed to be sliced off the previously existing Celtic kingdom of Dumnonia. It would seem as if the Saxons called the Dumnonii "Waelas,"<sup>14</sup> using a somewhat loose descriptive word. If so, may not "Waelas" be found at the base of Wills Neck, *i.e.* Waelas Neck: according to Professor Freeman, also in Williton, Waelaston; Willet, Williscombe or Wiveliscombe, etc., etc., just as to this day there are "Welsh grounds" in the Severn Sea. Still King Alfred must have known "Dumnonia," as Asser uses it. Asser often gives us an alternative Celtic place-name, as if such were still in use, *e.g.*, Coit-mawr for Selwood. The dates of the Saxon impact upon Dumnonia are fairly well known from the chroniclers. In A.D. 658, Kenwalch renewed a war against the Britons, according to Ethelwerd, and pursued them to a place called Pederydon, *i.e.*, Petherton. Kentwine, in A.D. 682, had so far established himself in West Somerset as to be able to grant a charter of that *famosa silva* of Cantok, or Quantock, to the Abbey of Glastonbury.<sup>15</sup> Sir Francis Palgrave has written "Damnonia, whose sovereigns

(12). Vol i, p. 120.

(13). See also S.A.P., vol. xviii, Som. Glossary, p. 9.

(14). See King Alfred's Will.

(15). S.A.P., vol. xviii., p. 43.

had been so long predominant among their compeers were not entirely subdued, *i.e.*, by Kentwine's conquest. Damnonia, Duffneint or Deunon was conquered as far as the Exe." Still, with regard to West Somerset the Saxon conquest must have been fairly complete in King Ine's day, when the Castle of Taunton was founded and both Wells and Glastonbury were endowed. Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne (*c.* A.D. 656-709), must have still attached some distinct geographical meaning to Domnonia when he wrote of a journey he took, "usque diram Domnoniam . . . per carentem Cornubiam," but in West Somerset the Sumorsaetas were gradually eating up this limb of Dumnonia.

Passing on to A.D., 845, "Dux Ernulfus cum Sumorsaetensibus" and Dux Osricus of Dorset, in company with Alstan, the militant Bishop of Sherborne, defeated the Danes at the mouth of the River Parret. In 878, and therefore in King Alfred's time, there was "Odda, Duke of Devon," and Ethelnoth, Duke of Somerset, "having with him the men of the Province of Somerset only," who aided the King in his great distress during the Athelney campaign.

There is a technical as well as a real sense to be attached to the "Dux" and the "Ducatus." But the leaders of the day are leaders still of men rather than representatives of exactly defined spheres or territories. There was an equally involved and obscure meaning to be attached to the territorial *parochia* of a Bishop or a Bishopric, notably in the case of Asser. The ninth century was a century of transitions. There was no doubt about the Saxon conquest and the subjugation of the British, but the organising hand had not yet been laid upon it all. Old nomenclature was getting meaningless. The Bishoprics of the West had not yet been arranged, and Bishop Asser is like a kind of "Bishop of Melanesia," roving over a large oversea Diocese stretching from St. David's to Sherborne, including Exeter and Cornwall.

The term Damnonia did not disappear in King Alfred's reign.

The Saxon chroniclers, Simeon, Asser and Florence use Domnonia as the land upon which the brother of Inguar and Healfdene (Simeon says Inguar and Healfdene, whilst Ethelwerd says Healfdene, brother of the tyrant Inguuar) descended in 878 with their twenty-three ships "ex Demeticâ regione." This passage is historically very interesting, if only for the reason that, in mentioning both Damnonia and Demetia, it preserves the names of two very ancient Celtic kingdoms. It is also interesting because if we extend Damnonia to the Axe, "the Castle of Cynwith" may be the Castle of Combwich, possibly the King's Wick, close to the Parret, a topographical point of interest in following the Danish campaign of 878. Hitherto, it has been customary to place the Castle of Cynwith, near Appledore, in North Devon, a meaningless place.

William of Malmesbury (c. 140), in his *Gesta Regum*,<sup>16</sup> writes: "In Domnonia quae Devenescire dicitur," making one the synonym of the other. But we may ask whether there was at any time any intentional re-arrangement by which the meaning of Domnonia was stereotyped and made the equivalent of modern Devonshire. This author has preserved the tradition that King Alfred devised the arrangement of land into Hundreds and Tythings, but Bishop Stubbs, criticising this, remarks that "although irreconcilable with facts, it may embody a portion of a historical truth, but the very inequality of the Hundreds, as we everywhere find it, precludes any hypothesis of a primitive symmetrical arrangement."<sup>17</sup> The inequality of Hundreds is surely a very striking feature in West Somerset. Some, like the Hundreds of Wecet (Watchet) and of Banwell, have disappeared altogether without leaving much of their original form. The sporadic placing of certain *membra* of certain Hundreds, such as we see in North Petherton and Whitley Hundreds, for

(16). Lit. 1, pap. 6.

(17). Stubbs' Const. Hist. vol. i., p. 99.

example, is a puzzle. Why should Holford, at the foot of the Quantocks, be in Whitley Hundred with Cossington and the Polden parishes? Yet, somehow or other, we feel inclined to think that it was in King Alfred's time that Somersetshire assumed its present land dimensions and began to appropriate part of the ancient Dumnonia. Could it have been that King Alfred sheared off from Dumnonia so much of the land Westward as took in the Royal Forest of Exmoor? Forests were territorial definitions from a very early date. In early British Church History, "East and West Selwood" pointed to certain areas defined by the existence of a Forest. The Hundreds of Carhampton and of Williton, which took in so much Forest land in Saxon times,<sup>18</sup> might or might not have existed before the country of the Sumersaetas was spoken of as Somersetshire. But it would not be necessary for a Hundred to exist before a Shire. "Triconscire" or Cornwall, part of King Alfred's Royal property, was a "scire" up to the Twelfth Century. Now it is comprised in the Hundred of Trigg. King Alfred might have really foreshadowed the present shape of the County, at any rate along the shores of the Severn Sea, by lumping his Royal properties together on both sides of the Parrett, East and West, and throwing in the whole block of coastal regions covered by the Royal Hundreds of Cannington, Williton, and Carhampton. The ports and anchorages of North Somerset and of ancient Dumnonia were relatively of far greater value in olden time than now, and for a strategic reason also it might have seemed expedient to bring them all under one "Dux" and one "Ducatus." Wecet or Watchet was important enough to have a mint in the days of Edward the Elder, and Porlock was a well-known Saxon port. Even in the days of the Civil Wars Dunster and Minehead were important as places of communication with Ireland and Wales. The policy, therefore, which gave to Somersetshire certain parts of Dumnonia

(18). See Eyton's Domesday Survey of Somerset.

was in no sense haphazard. (1) The existence of a block of Royal property, (2) of the Forest of Exmoor, and (3) of the various little ports and harbours might have assisted, all in their turn, to give us the present boundaries. But, far back in history, Somersetshire may claim to have formed part of the Sea Kingdom of Dumnonia, a kingdom which had existed in name almost one thousand years before the reign of King Alfred.