

# Wales

A Very Peculiar

# History







**‘You’ve got to  
get your first  
tackle in early,  
even if it’s late.’**

*Welsh rugby international (and bard)  
Ray Gravell fails to make his tactics clear.*

## Eisteddfodau

- Eisteddfodau (the plural of eisteddfod) are the leading artistic festivals in Wales. Some are small local events, others prestige affairs of international importance.
- Contests between poets, singers, writers and other artists are the main events at an eisteddfod.
- The first known eisteddfod took place in Cardigan in 1176. It was organised by Prince Rhys ap Gruffydd of Deheubarth.
- The word eisteddfod means ‘a session’ or ‘a sitting’.
- The last of the great medieval eisteddfodau was held at Caerwys in 1568. After that there were fewer and fewer professional bards, so the festivals declined.
- The first modern eisteddfod was held in 1729 at Corwen and was organised by local man Thomas Jones.
- The most important modern eisteddfod is the National Eisteddfod, which lasts for 2 days in August. About 150,000 people attend, and up to 6,000 compete in the various contests.
- At most eisteddfodau, Welsh is the only language allowed to be used.

## Human sacrifice

At some Celtic festivals a criminal or a prisoner of war would be put into a large figure made of wicker and straw. The wicker figure was then set on fire and the victim burned to death. Other victims were beheaded and the severed heads were offered to the gods. The bodies were often put in pits or in bogs.

But sacrifices of animals were more common. The killing of humans may have been kept for special festivals or when a tribe or kingdom was in severe need.

## Head hunters

After a battle, the Celts would slice off the heads of dead enemies and nail them up over the front door to impress visitors. If a warrior was very proud of the head of a famous enemy, it would be preserved in oil inside a chest. It would be brought out at dinner to be shown off to friends for the next hundred years or more. Each time the head came out, the family would tell the story of how it was taken.



## The forgotten years

The Celts of Wales eventually formed five major tribes. These were the Silures of the south-east, the Demetae of the south-west, the Ordovicii of the north-west, the Deceangli of the north-east and the Cornovii of central Wales. Each tribe was ruled by a powerful royal family, but there were many smaller noble families who were important locally.

## Celtic warfare

For the Celts, going to war was an occasion for singing, drinking and generally strutting their stuff. Everyone wore their best jewellery and finest clothes while carrying weapons and armour decorated with gold and silver. The warriors formed up in dense masses while the nobles rode in front in their chariots.

Most battles began with the nobles dashing out in front of their armies to show off. They were skilled in galloping at high speed while juggling with their swords, doing handstands on the backs of the chariot ponies or dancing up and down the chariot poles. Nobles would dash forward to engage each other in single combat, with the armies cheering them on.



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had collapsed. Irish settlers were moving in to take over the rich farmlands of the Lleyn Peninsula and the far south-west.

In 410, the Romans who ran the British towns asked the Emperor Honorius to send army units to drive off the invaders. Honorius told them that he could spare neither men nor money to defend Britain. They would have to defend themselves. Most Romans assumed that things would get better, but they didn't. Roman rule over Britain had ended.

### The first martyrs

On 1 July 304, two Christians named Aaron and Julius were executed at Caerleon. Their crime was that they refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. The new religion of Christianity may have come to Britain as early as 150, but it took a long time to catch on. In 314 three British bishops travelled to a conference in Gaul (France), but the Welsh would not become fully Christianised for many years to come.

## Chapter Three

# The Cymry come forward

## Wales after the Romans



**T**he years after the Romans abandoned Britain in AD 410 are among the most obscure in Welsh history. What we do know is that in 410 Wales was part of a Roman province, but by 750 it was home to a new nation: the Cymry, or Welsh.

It would seem that the councils of the civitates (main towns) of Britain created a new position called the 'high ruler', who would organise the defence of Britain. This ruler, Vortigern,<sup>1</sup> followed standard Roman practice and hired

*1. Historians are not quite sure whether Vortigern was his name or his title; most believe that it was his name.*

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mercenaries – soldiers who were willing to work for anyone who paid them. He chose two Saxon brothers, Hengist and Horsa, and their warband.

Big mistake! In about 440, a quarrel between Vortigern and Hengist led to warfare that devastated much of southern Britain. The peace treaty handed the civitas of Cantium (Kent) to Hengist, who set himself up as an independent ruler – or ‘king’ in his language. Soon other mercenaries did the same.

### Princes in charge

In Roman times the local rulers in Wales were often given Roman-style titles and finery – partly to make them look more important to the locals, and partly to remind them who was really in charge. Some were given the title of *princeps*, which means ‘first citizen’ – or ‘top man’. Later, the English form of this word – ‘prince’ – was used as the title for an independent ruler in Welsh areas. It was the equivalent of ‘king’ in English areas.

### The red dragon rises

According to legend, Vortigern ordered a castle to be built on the River Glaslyn in Gwynedd. His men worked hard, but every night an earthquake struck and the building collapsed.

Vortigern sent for a boy named Ambrosius Aurelianus, who magically revealed that two dragons were fighting in a cave beneath the site of the castle: a red dragon of Britain and a White dragon of the invading Germanic mercenaries. Ambrosius foretold that the red dragon would win and rise up from the ground.

Vortigern then gave the fortress to Ambrosius – hence its name, Dinas Emrys, which means ‘the stronghold of Ambrosius’. The red dragon became a symbol of Welsh resistance against the English.

