

Celtic Kingdoms of the British Isles

Celts of Britain

Selgovae (Solway)



The Selgovae were an Iron Age Celtic people who occupied much of the territory between the Cheviot Hills and Dumfries in southern **Scotland**, probably with a southwards extension into the modern county of Northumberland and into eastern Strathclyde (Ptolemy says that they reached the Firth of Forth). They may have extended further to the west than is shown in the accompanying map, giving the Solway Firth their name, but perhaps this extension occurred later, after the building of Hadrian's Wall and the loss of their southern territorial extension. They were certainly this far south-west by the time Ptolemy wrote, around the 140s. The tribe was neighboured to the east by the **Votadini**, to the south by the confederation of the **Brigantes** (and especially by the Carvetii), to the west by the **Novantae**, and to the north by the **Damnonii**.

The tribe remains little-known, mostly due to its lack of contact with the Continental Celts or the **Romans** before the latter's invasion of the Brigantes in the AD 70s. They may have been related to at least some of the tribes that made up the Brigantian confederation, especially the Carvetii in the region of Carlisle, and for the most part they occupied the Southern Upland region of modern Scotland. While it seems obvious that the modern name of Solway (or Salway) is based on the tribe's name, there is a claim that 'Solway' is an Anglo-Saxon construction, 'sol' meaning mud and 'waeth' meaning a ford, with the ford in question crossing the mudflats at Eskmouth. Documentary evidence for the name only begins in the thirteenth century, long after both the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon periods, so it is impossible to say which origin might be the correct one.

The tribe's name breaks down as *selg-ā-(je/o-), 'hunt', so that *selgo-wiro-(??) means 'hunter'. Irish Gaelic has seilg (vt, vi) for 'hunt'. The tribe saw themselves as 'the hunters'. In Brythonic this was possibly rendered as Selgowion or Selgowon. In **Welsh**, the Brythonic 's' became an 'h' in many cases, so that 'hunt' was later rendered as 'helfa'. The tribe's capital was on Eildon Hill North near Melrose, and the Romans later built the fort of Trimontium, at Newstead, nearby. The Selgovae may have been one of the 'four kingdoms of ancient Scotland' which apparently became established in the second century. By the end of the fourth century the bulk of the Selgovae's northern and central territory seems to have been taken over by **Alt Clut**, and the remnants were part of the supposed **High King** Coel Hen's 'Kingdom of **Northern Britain**'.

(Additional information by Edward Dawson, and from *The Oxford History of England: Roman Britain*, Peter Salway.)

- AD 79 With the **Romans** advancing northwards in preparation for a campaign beyond the territory of the defeated Brigantes, the Selgovae abandon their hill fort capital at Eildon Hill North. Another two hill forts are also abandoned in the face of the Roman advance, these both being on the summit of Cademuir Hill, to the south-west of Peebles in the Border region. They are never reoccupied. Other tribal forts include Dreva Craig, south-west of Broughton in the northern Borders, Rubers Law, near Hanwick in Borders, and Tamshiel Rigg, south-east of Hanwick.
- 80 - 81 The **Roman Governor of Britain** leads two invading columns into Lowland Scotland, with (probably) the Twentieth and Ninth Legions meeting up at Inveresk (near Edinburgh) in the territory of the **Votadini**. The force sets up permanent garrisons in its wake. The following year the campaign continues into the territory of the Selgovae and **Novantae** tribes. A small wooden defensive position which possibly serves as a watch tower is set up at the western end of the Eildon Hill North hill fort.



A view of the three Eildon Hills, location of the Selgovae oppida, or capital settlement

- 82 The western coast of Lowland Scotland is secured as far north as the Clyde in order that the **Damnonii** tribesmen there can be contained, and perhaps to prevent **Irish** landings. By this time, **Governor** Gnaeus Julius Agricola has founded the first military encampment at Newstead, and this becomes the new tribal capital of Trimontium under **Roman** rule.

- c.140s Ptolemy confirms the location of the Selgovae, and records their four major towns as Trimontium (Newstead, in the modern Borders), Carbantorigum, Corda, and Uxellum. The bivallate hill fort of Eildon Hill North, the tribe's pre-Roman capital, overlooks Trimontium, although it is now abandoned. The latter name means, in Latin, 'place of the three mountains', the mountains being the three Eildon hills. The other major towns have yet to be located. Roman forts have been erected at three sites, Birrens, Netherby and Bewcastle, to provide advance warning of threats to the Wall. While the Selgovae themselves may not be a threat, they quite probably turn a blind eye to warbands from further north passing through, especially those of the **Damnonii**, who remain largely outside Roman control and are particularly aggressive in their defiance of the Romans.

- c.175 The reorganisation of the frontier by Emperor Marcus Aurelius means that **Roman** troops largely pull out of the territory and withdraw to Hadrian's Wall. The forts at Birrens and Netherby are retained for a time before being abandoned completely. The Selgovae remain entirely undocumented after Ptolemy, and whether they take part in the increasingly frequent incursions over the Wall in the later years of Roman Britain can only be guessed.

- 360 - 361 At the start of 360, **Roman** Caesar Julian (the Apostate) is wintering in Lutetia Parisiorum (the early Paris) when reports reach him that the **Scotti** and **Picts** have broken a previous agreement (perhaps made in 343) and are plundering lands close to the frontier, presumably those of the **Novantae** and Selgovae. Whether the campaign goes ahead under a less senior commander after the original commander is recalled is unknown.

- 4th century The Selgovae territory immediately north of Hadrian's Wall emerges as part of the 'Kingdom of Northern Britain' in the late fourth century while the remainder seems to have been seized by the Britons of **Alt Clut**, the descendants of the **Damnonii**. By the start of the sixth century the remaining Selgovae region appears to be a self-governed minor kingdom under the name of **Caer-Guendoleu**.

Caer-Guendoleu (Solway)

[map](#)

The former tribal area of the **Selgovae**, north of Hadrian's Wall, crystallised as Caer-Guendoleu. This petty kingdom bore the same name as its chief stronghold, which was ruled by the king who was most closely associated with the area, Guenddolau, and which has survived as modern Carwinley. The kingdom was bordered by **Bemaccia** to the east, **Rheged** to the south, **Galwyddel** to the west, and **Alt Clut** to the north.

The Selgovae appear to have been staunchly opposed to the **Roman** invasion, judging by the number of forts built in their territory, but the early battles may have knocked the heart out of their defiance. Instead, the focus for resistance seems to have moved north, to the **Damnonii**, and it is this people who can be found dominating much of the Selgovae territory by the end of the fourth century. The southern remnant, near Hadrian's Wall, was part of **High King** Coel Hen's 'Kingdom of **Northern Britain**'. According to tradition, this territory gradually broke up during the course of the fifth and early sixth century, and Caer-Guendoleu emerged as one of its last, and smallest, divisions.

[feature](#)

As an independent territory, Caer-Guendoleu seems first to have been ruled by Ceidio, the son of Einion ap Mor, who was himself the first king of a reduced **Ebrauc**. Upon Einion's death, his territory was divided between his sons, with Eliffer gaining Ebrauc itself, and Ceidio gaining the region north of the 'Salway' (the modern Solway). The new ruler's title, 'King North of the Salway', reflected a remnant of Coel

Hen's grander title, although this is information that has only survived from several centuries after the event, making at least some of it rather suspect.

When Ceidio's son was killed in battle in 573, close relatives in the powerful kingdom of **North Rheged** absorbed the territory, with Urien's two brothers ruling it, probably as a sub-kingdom. Once North Rheged had been destroyed, its remnants, including whatever remained of **Caer-Guendoleu**, seem to have been taken over and held into the eleventh century by **Alt Clut**, although the situation regarding this is extremely sketchy. It may have fallen under Viking control from **York** for a time in the late ninth century.

(Additional information from *The Landscape of King Arthur*, Geoffrey Ashe, and from *The Oxford History of England: Roman Britain*, Peter Salway.)

c.505 Upon the death of Einion ap Mor, king of **Ebrauc**, his younger son, Ceido, inherits the western portion of the domain, gaining the remnants of the former **Selgovae** tribal territory.

c.505 - c.550 Ceidio ap Einion Son of Einion ap Mor of **Ebrauc**. 'King North of the Salway'.

547 To the east, the **British** kingdom of **Bernaccia** is seized by the **Angles** who have been serving as *laeti* and the ruling king, Morgan Bulc is forced out. He takes refuge with the **Goutodin**, shifting his power base there, but the loss leaves **Caer-Guendoleu's** border exposed to the invaders. Fortunately they remain relatively weak for some decades to come.



The incredibly scenic Solway Firth, one of the very few modern links back to the Selgovae, although a highly debatable one

c.560 - 573 Guenddolau / Gwenddolew ap Ceidio King of **Caer-Guendoleu**. Died at Battle of **Ardferydd**.

573 One of the most pointless and destructive disputes of the period arises over the stronghold of **Caerlaverock** (the 'Fort of the Lark'), located on the northern side of the Solway Firth immediately south of **Dumfries**. This is very likely to be in **Caer-Guendoleu's** territory, where it abuts that of **Galwyddel**. Although the spot is tranquil today, traces of fortification can still be seen nearer **Liddel Water**. Not far away is **Ardferydd** (**Ardferydd**, **Armterid**, or even **Atterith**, and today known as **Arthuret**, near **Longtown** in **Cumbria**). The principle leader of the side opposing **Guenddolau** is **Rhydderch Hen** of **Alt Clut**, most probably for territorial reasons.

Guenddolau dies in the battle at **Ardferydd** against **Alt Clut**, **Ebrauc** and **Dunoting**, with **Rhydderch** being backed up by **Guenddolau's** own brother and cousin respectively. The early source of information for this event comes from the *Annales Cambriae*, which also records that 'Merlin went mad'. This would be **Myrddin Wyllt**, **Guenddolau's** court bard who ranks with **Taliesin** in seniority and who seems to be confused with a possible **Merlin** of the mid-fifth century in the eyes of later tradition (most especially by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** in *The History of the Kings of Britain*). This is one of many internecine wars which all serve to weaken the **British** defences in this century and, with the king having no heir, **Caer-Guendoleu** passes into the hands of another cousin, **Urien Rheged** of **North Rheged**, and is ruled by his two brothers.

573 - c.616 Llew ap Cynfarch 'King in the North'. Brother of **Urien Rheged**.

573 - c.616 Arawn ap Cynfarch 'King North of the Salway'. May have ruled alone **616-c.630**.

c.616 - 632 The remnants of **North Rheged** fall to **Edwin** of **Bernicia** and **Caer-Guendoleu** is apparently absorbed into **Alt Clut**, to be amassed into one complete southern territory known as **Cumbria** (after the **British** 'people of the same land', the **Cymri**). It perhaps exists as a pocket enclave until about **630**, and is perhaps ruled by **Arawn ap Cynfarch** during that

period, but the situation in this phase is even more obscure than for the rest of the kingdom's existence. For a time during the late ninth century Cumbria (including Caer-Guendoleu) may be controlled by the Vikings of York, and for periods afterwards it is either a short-lived independent kingdom of Cumbria or a sub-territory of Strathclyde, before being claimed permanently by the English crown.

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