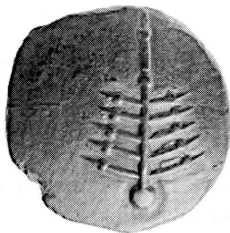


Ash and the Dobunnic tree

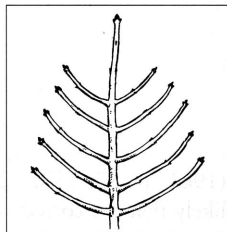
CHRIS RUDD

Keith Allsworth farms in the Cotswolds and collects coins of the Dobunni. When cutting hedges recently he noticed that the branches of pollarded ash-trees looked remarkably like the branched symbol on gold staters of the Dobunni. He wrote to me, saying the ash-tree “would make a very good emblem for an agricultural people.”¹ Having examined coppiced ash on our own farm, I must agree.

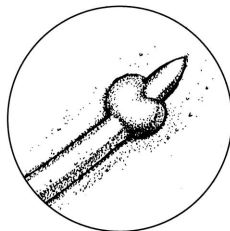
The Common Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) grows faster than oak and produces one of the toughest, most pliable timbers known to man² – it will bear more weight before breaking than any other tree – making it the perfect wood for a vast variety of agricultural purposes, from hurdling to hop-poles.³ Indigenous to all parts of Britain, ash thrives on chalk or limestone soils, such as the limestone clays of the Cotswolds.⁴ One of its key distinguishing features is a coal-black pointed bud at the end of each stem. Could this be the reason why the



Dobunnic tree on
Eisu gold stater



Budding branch of coppiced ash



Stem from branch of
Dobunnic tree



Stem from branch
of budding ash

1. Like the branch from a coppiced ash-tree, the Dobunnic emblem has evenly paired stems, each with a pointed 'bud' at the end.

paired stems of the Dobunnic branched emblem each have a 'bud' at the end and why these 'buds' are often pointed? Like Keith Allsworth, I believe that the ash-tree may have been a tribal totem of the Dobunni and that the stylised tree on their gold staters was possibly modelled on a coppiced ash-branch.⁵

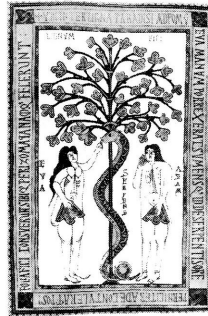
The Dobunnic branched emblem is certainly distinctive. Professor Christopher Hawkes says it is "used nowhere else in Britain."⁶ Derek Allen says it "looks like a kind of national device on these coins, to be compared with the charge on a shield. It could be seen as a tree or plant, indeed it is often called a fern, which is to my mind far-fetched... Whatever it may have symbolised, the device was not used in the same way elsewhere in Britain and served to distinguish the main stream of Dobunnic gold coinage from other comparable coins."⁷

Derek Allen is correct to call the Dobunnic tree "a kind of national device." Tribal symbols, peculiar to particular regions, are by no means unknown in the late Iron Age and sometimes occur on Celtic coins.⁸ Moreover, it is commonly agreed that certain trees were held in high regard by Celtic peoples, ash being one of them. I am now completely convinced that the Dobunnic branched emblem is a tribal or dynastic totem, a Celtic 'Tree of Life' symbol, and not a human skull-and-ribcage or fish skeleton as I once rashly speculated.⁹ Before stating why I believe the ash-tree may have been of special significance to the Dobunni (or at least to five of their rulers), I will briefly discuss the more general perception of it as a sacred tree with magical properties, as attested by European mythology and folklore.

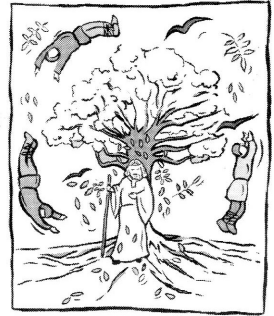
The concept of the Tree of Life can be found all over the world, in all five continents and in all ancient cultures, from the Kien Mu tree of China and the Bodhi-tree of India to the Judaic fruit-tree in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 3:1-24). The ash-tree also figures frequently in old European traditions. Susan Lavender and Anna Franklin, shamanic herbalists, claim that the deities associated with the ash are Athene, Cernunnos, Gwydion, Herne, Llyr, Mars, Neptune, Odin, Poseidon, Saturn, Thor, Uranus, Woden, Ymir and Zeus, and have published this useful (though unsourced) summary of ancient ash-tree beliefs: "The ash has



Tree of Life on ancient Assyrian seal



Tree of Knowledge in Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.



Nordic World Tree, symbol of eternal cycle of birth and death.

2. Like other mythological trees, the Dobunnic ash-tree probably represented the continuity of life.

associations with creation, linking the three realms of being, and with the elements of fire and water. Ash trees sometimes appear in mythology as fathers of the race of man. Zeus was said to have fashioned the third or bronze race of man from ash trees, while oak trees were the first mothers of men. In Scandinavian myth the first man, Ask, was made from ash, the first woman, Embala, from either an elm or according to some variations an alder or a rowan. The ash appears in Nordic myth as Yggdrasil, the world tree which links the realms of existence. The word 'yggdr' derives from the Greek 'hydra' meaning the sea or the element of water. Yggdrasil's branches were believed to extend through the whole cosmos. It had its roots in the primal source of matter, its branches reached up into the heavens, its leaves were the clouds and its fruit the stars. Legend tells that Odin hung from the world tree for nine days and nights to gain the secrets of the runes in return for one of his eyes... In Odin's runic alphabet the letters are formed from ash twigs. It connects the Underworld, Middle Earth and the Heavens. In Celtic myth the ash connects the three circles of existence, Abred,

Gwynedd and Ceugant, which can be interpreted as past, present and future or confusion, balance and creative force, there being only continual rebirth as passage is made from circle to circle until the Land of the Blessed is finally reached.¹⁰ In Ireland three ash trees comprised part of the five sacred trees of Ireland; The Tree of Tortu, The Tree of Dathi and The Branching Tree of Usnech. The felling of the five trees in AD 665 symbolised the triumph of Christianity over Paganism. The other trees were an oak and a yew. Still standing at Killura in the 19th century was a descendant of the sacred tree of Creevna, an ash. Its wood was used as a charm against drowning and many immigrants took ash charms on their journey to America. The derivation of the word ash may relate to 'great fire blaze' or 'heaven'. The ash, like the oak, seems to attract lightning, it 'courts the flash'. It is the lightning strike of the Great Sky Father that fertilises Mother Earth, and the ash is seen as a channel attracting the lightning from the sky, through the middle realm, down into the primal matter of the earth, through its roots standing in damp soil. Because of its association with this fertilising power, the ash is a tree of birth and regeneration. A Druidic ash wand with spiral decoration representing rebirth was found on Anglesey [dated "early first century AD" says Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, 1986, p.168]. In Celtic myth Gwydion made his wands of enchantment from ash. Ash was connected with both the solstices when the fires were lit to encourage the sun. Eating red ash buds on midsummer eve would protect from enchantment and this was also a time to cut a divination wand from the ash to attract the inspirational fire of the heavens. One variation of the Yule log was a bundle of ash faggots burned at the midwinter solstice. In ancient Greece ash was sacred to Poseidon, god of the sea. Ash has many associations with water. The Meliei, or ash spirits, were said to have sprung from the blood of Uranus when Cronos castrated him. The ash was thought to be an image of the rain clouds; the nymphs of the ash were cloud spirits, consequently ash was used in rain making ceremonies. In Wales and Ireland all coracles and oars were made of ash. The horse was Poseidon's sacred animal, and in ancient Ireland and Wales rods for controlling horses were always made from ash. It was also used in making kings' thrones so that the ruler would be in touch with the wisdom

of all three realms... **FOLK MAGIC:** As a cure for rickets the child was passed through a cleft in an ash tree, and afterwards a sympathetic bond between the child and the tree existed. Any subsequent damage to the tree was relected in the health of the child and vice versa, therefore the ash tree could never be cut down as this would result in the disease returning. Ash leaves confer good fortune, especially those from an 'even ash', i.e. a tree that has the same number of divisions each side. The ash tree has the ability to cure warts by taking them from the sufferer: 'Ashen tree, ashen tree, pray buy these warts of me'. A pin is then used to prick the wart and then is inserted into the tree. The warts then appear as knobs on the tree. Juice extracted from the ash leaf had the reputation of being able to cure snake bites. Pliny wrote that such was its power over snakes that 'serpents dare not touch the evening and morning shadows of the tree'. Placing an ash leaf beneath the pillow produces prophetic dreams. **MAGICAL USES:** The ash represents the world tree or the axis mundi, linking all the spheres of existence. An ash staff may be planted in the middle of the circle, or used by the individual magician to set up the axis mundi, the connecting link with the three realms. The witches broomstick also has an ash pole and is used ritually for the same purpose, conducting magical energy." (*Herb Craft*, Capall Bann, 1996, pp.56-58).

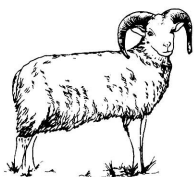


3. Druidic shaman in mask (or Celtic tree-god) bending over sacred ash-tree. Silver coin of Petrocorii, BN 4310a.

Many of the ancient ash-tree beliefs listed above are reflected in the later folklore traditions of Britain. I have read no less than thirty well documented anecdotes about the protective, divinatory and healing powers of the ash-tree, collected from different parts of Britain and dating from the 16th to 20th century. I shall quote just two here, both from the former territory of the Dobunni: Firstly, in Warwickshire, "Thomas Chillingworth, now about 34, was, when an infant...passed through an [ash] tree, now perfectly sound, which he preserves with so much care...for it is believed the life of the

patient depends upon the life of the tree...These trees are left to close of themselves, or are closed with nails...Instances of trees that have been employed in the cure are very common."¹² Secondly, in Herefordshire, "A maiden ash was split and a child passed through it, from the father's hands into another man's, nine times. The father said 'The Lord giveth', the other man replied, 'The Lord receiveth'. The tree was then carefully bound up, and if it grew together again, the patient would recover [from rupture]."¹³

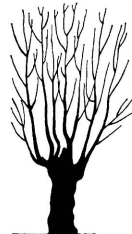
You may smirk at these quaint superstitions and wonder what they have got to do with the branched emblem on Dobunnic staters. My point is this. For thousands of years rational human beings, every bit as clever as we are, have imagined that there is something special, something magical, about the ash. We therefore shouldn't be surprised to discover that an Iron Age tribe adopted the ash as their arboreal mascot, their apotropaic icon, and that they emblazoned it on their gold coins.¹⁴ The fact that the Romano-Celtic god, Mars Olloudius, was revered in Gloucestershire may be additional evidence of the Dobunni's reverence for the ash-tree. Olloudius (Celtic *ollo-vidios*) means 'mighty tree'.¹⁵



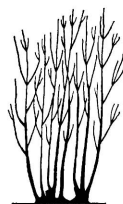
4. Reconstruction of typical Iron Age sheep based on closest surviving modern breed.

The Dobunni would have had many reasons – some of them special reasons – for being grateful to the ash-tree and for making it their tribal totem. The Dobunni were big sheep farmers and prehistoric progenitors of the famous medieval wool trade in the Cotswolds.¹⁶ In order to enclose their sheep, especially when they were lambing at Imbolc, being sheared in the Spring, and being slaughtered at Samhain, the Dobunni must have built (and constantly re-built) many miles of cattle fencing, every inch of it made from cleft rods of coppiced ash or coppiced hazel. It is highly likely that the Dobunni also used ash for their wattle-and-daub houses, river coracles, paddles, sail hoops, wicker fish-baskets, meat trays, fence poles, ladder poles,

ladder rungs, pole lathes, bows and arrows, spear hafts, walking sticks, shepherds crooks, hay forks, axe handles, mallet handles, besom brush handles, plough shafts, yokes, wheel felloes, kiln pallets, pottery crates, sledge runners and large horse panniers for carrying iron ore from the Forest of Dean to the tribal foundries three miles northwest of Cirencester. Moreover, the ceremonial war-chariots of Boduoc, Corio, Comux, Catti, Anted and Eisu (if they had them) would undoubtedly have been constructed from the finest ash-wood in Gloucestershire.¹⁷



Pollarded tree



Coppiced tree

5. Two ways of cutting back trees to produce more copious crops of straighter rods.

My proposal that the stylised ash-tree on Dobunnic gold staters was modelled on a coppiced branch is based on the fact that coppiced ash-trees, as opposed to unmanaged ash-trees, produce shoots with more regularly paired stems. So, can we be confident that ash-trees were coppiced in the Cotswolds two-thousand years ago? I think we can. Regularly cutting back ash-trees and hazel-trees produces the most plentiful supply of the straightest shoots; straightness being a prime requisite for any wattle work. Documentary evidence for coppicing in England dates back to the ninth century AD¹⁸ and archaeological evidence for this type of woodland management extends back to the Neolithic period.¹⁹ Coppiced ash-poles were used as underwood in the Neolithic Sweet Track of the Somerset Levels²⁰ and Iron Age wattle houses were excavated at Glastonbury 'lake village', on the borders of the Dobunni,²¹ and at their pre-Roman capital at Bagendon, Gloucestershire.²² Such extensive use of wattle, for fencing as well as housing, means that the sheep-farming Dobunni must surely have practised coppicing and therefore been very conscious not only of the evenly paired shoots on every coppiced ash-branch, but also of the distinctive black flower-buds that emerge every winter from the tip of each new shoot, like tiny

deer-hooves.²³ Celtic die engravers were keen observers of nature and, by exaggerating the key features of fauna and flora, were able to capture their essential character on coins.

Finally, as further evidence perhaps of the Dobunni's apparent affinity with, and reverence for, the ash-tree, I might add that the tribal name itself may stem from the ancient British word for ash, which is *onno*.²⁴ I can cite no linguistic authority in support of this wild speculation, but offer it simply as an innocent babe of an idea, ready to be butchered by the better informed. In the same reckless vein I might also suggest that the first syllable of Dobunni is cognate with the Old Irish word for black, which is *dob*,²⁵ thus giving us a tribal name which, loosely translated, may be 'black-ash people'.²⁶

Notes and references

1. "I have been collecting coins of the Dobunni (my local tribe) for many years. While out hedge-cutting on the farm, a new stem from an old pollarded ash-tree caught my eye. I had already cut the leading tip, but the rows of small branches coming from the stem in pairs are all natural. Then I looked more carefully at other pollarded ash-trees. They are all similar. The new stems in the middle are the straightest and all show the paired branches with the bud at the end. The ash is the last tree to grow leaves in the spring and all the old farming tools have ash handles; some were grown into hay forks or split like hazel to make wattle for fencing. Thinking about it, this would make a very good emblem for an agricultural people." K. Allsworth, pers.comm., 15.3.03.

2. "No other timber is so well able to withstand rough usage and sudden strains...English-grown ash is the toughest known...The use of ash for handles in Britain goes back to the first century AD., and it has been identified attached to an iron implement unearthed from the Roman settlement at Caerleon in Monmouthshire." H.L. Edlin, *Woodland Crafts in Britain*, 1973, p. 27.

3. J. Howe, *Hazel Coppice*, Hampshire County Council, 1991, p. 34.

4. "Many of our best ashwoods occur on a particular geological formation known as the Carboniferous Limestone...There are fine ashwoods in the clefts of the Jurassic Limestone ridge that forms the Cotswold hills." H.L.

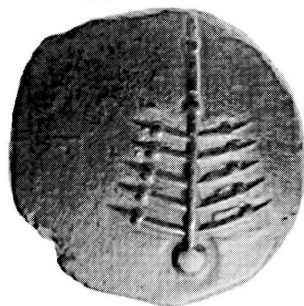
Edlin, *Woodland Crafts in Britain*, 1973, p.26.

5. Simon Lilly, former archaeology student of Prof. Stuart Piggott at the University of Edinburgh and co-author of two books about trees, also believes that the Dobunnic tree is an ash-tree. Pers. comm. 18.10.03. He says: "The one thing that is known for certain about the Celts was their religious and spiritual character, (excessive from the Roman's pragmatic point of view), and that their spiritual life was centred around the sacred grove, the *nemeton*." *Tree: Essence, Spirit and Teacher*, 1999, p. 94. Simon Lilly also says: "The fact that ash has a silvery grey bark and leaves with between nine and thirteen segments aligns it to lunar aspects of the goddess (nine is the magical three-times-three, sacred to the Celtic peoples and their forerunners; thirteen is the number of full moons in a lunar year)." *Tree: Essence of Healing*, 1999, p. 79.

6. C. Hawkes, 'The Western Third C culture and the Belgic Dobunni,' in Elsie M. Clifford's, *Bagendon, a Belgic oppidum*, 1961, p.54.

7. D. Allen, 'A study of the Dobunnic coinage', in *Bagendon*, op.cit., pp. 83-84.

8. Such as the winged horse, fishing net, yoke and pentagram on coins of the Cantiaci; the three-tailed horse and crescentic 'snake-face' on coins of the Atrebrates; the hidden 'smiling face' and lyre on coins of the Belgae; the wolf, two crescent moons and neck torcs on coins of the Ecenii; the boar with solar symbols on coins of the Corieltauvi; the marine creatures, thunder-flash and 'pitchfork' on coins of the Durotriges; the winged symbols on coins of the Catuvellauni; and the ear of barley (or emmer wheat) on gold coins of Cunobelin. See William Stevens, 'Tribal emblems', *Coin News*, November 2002, pp. 23-24.



6. If the pointed pellets on the Dobunnic tree don't signify the pointed buds on the branch of a coppiced ash-tree, what do they represent? The globule at the base may symbolise the sun or cosmos.

9. "Is the Dobunnic tribal emblem of fern leaf,

tree or skeletal trophy? Most commentators and cataloguers encourage a vegetal interpretation of the symbol by planting it point upwards in their illustrations, like the ear of corn (or barley) on Cunobelin's gold staters. But this emblem probably pre-dates Cunobelin's coinage by 30-40 years. I prefer to see it the other way up because I find it hard to visualise a fern leaf or tree with a knob on one end and such a long point on the other. I see the Dobunnic emblem as a skeletal tribal trophy: a stylised human skeleton emphasising the skull, ribcage and spine. Perhaps the skeleton itself belonged to a former leader of the Dobunni, or a captured king, and was prominently displayed in the chieftan's home or in a sacred grove? Or maybe the skull and ribcage emblem was simply a symbol of death in battle, a warlike threat to neighbouring tribes in the north and west?" Chris Rudd list 19, (1995), no.26. "The wife of the man who sold me this gold stater said the branched emblem looked like the skeleton of a fish. Why not? Two large rivers, both with Celtic names – Severn and Avon – flow through Dobunnic territory and must have provided this tribe with many fish." Chris Rudd list 25 (1996), no. 30. "Discussion of the branched emblem...continues unabated and it is possible that the subject of the design may never be identified to everyone's satisfaction." P. Robinson, 'The Dobunnic branched emblem, again.' Chris Rudd list 53 (2000), p. 3.

10. Carol Rudd says: "To the Celts it represented the eternal round of birth and death and reincarnation...Ash twigs placed in a circle are a traditional protection against adders." *Flower Essences – An Illustrated Guide*, 1998. p. 57.

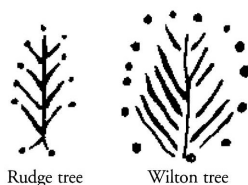
11. A compact collection of ash folklore can be found in *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, ed. I. Opie & M. Tatem, 1989.

12. *The Gentleman's Magazine* 1804, 909.

13. E.M. Leather, *The Folk-Lore of Herefordshire*, 1912, p. 80.

14. Clan-branding is a means of clan-bonding, a repetitive visual device for pulling people together and making them feel part of a community, even though they may be geographically isolated or socially disparate. Clan-branding is a worldwide phenomenon, more prevalent today than it has ever been before. For example, literally millions of human beings of every nation and religion, every class and colour, young and old, rich and poor, find a common bond, a shared identity, by displaying

the Nike brand-sign on their trainers, tee-shirts and baseball caps. A similar psychological button was being pressed every time a member of the Dobunni saw the tribal totem-tree. It seems unlikely that their clan-brand was reserved exclusively for the ruler's gold staters; it may also have been carved in wood or woven into woollen cloaks; and, of course, the tree itself was possibly decorated in some way in the sacred groves of the Dobunni.



7. Tree-like branched emblems from two rings found in Wiltshire.

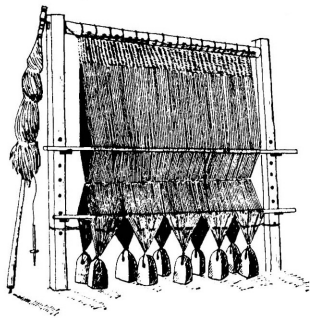
Dr Paul Robinson, numismatist, archaeologist and curator of Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes, notes that two finger-rings of the Romano-British period, each bearing a branched emblem, have been found not far from the land of the Dobunni – one from the Rudge villa site at Froxfield, Wilts., the other from Wilton, Wilts. See Chris Rudd list 53 (2000), p. 3; M. Henig, 'Roman Silver Rings from Wiltshire', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 79 (1985), 231f; B. Phillips & M. Henig, 'A gold Finger Ring from the Rudge Romano-British Villa Site', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 93 (2000), pp. 239-241. This year a third ring with a tree-like emblem has been found in Wiltshire (P. Robinson, pers.comm.. 21.10.03).



8. Stone relief of Mars Olloudius from Custom Scrubs, near Bisley, Glos.

15. Dr Anne Ross says: "Olloudius was worshipped

in the Antibes by the Narbonenses. His name may mean something like 'Great Tree' (**ollo-vidios*), a suitable name for the war god of a people who venerated trees and habitually likened their warriors to them... This comparing of warriors to trees has continued down to the modern period in Celtic literatures. An example from the Scottish Gaelic is as follows: the hero's death is referred to in these terms 'The tree has fallen headlong, its fruit has showered to the earth' (Macleod, 18). "*Pagan Celtic Britain*, 1967, pp. 172, 185-186. Prof. Miranda Aldhouse-Green says: "Locations as far apart as Custom Scrubs in Gloucestershire and Ollioules in southern Gaul attest the veneration of a god named Olloudius. The only image that exists depicts a male figure from the Cotswold site... dedicated to 'Mars Olloudius', but the god carries no military attributes... The double horn of plenty stresses the prosperity function of Olloudius among the Dobunni." *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, 1992, p. 166.



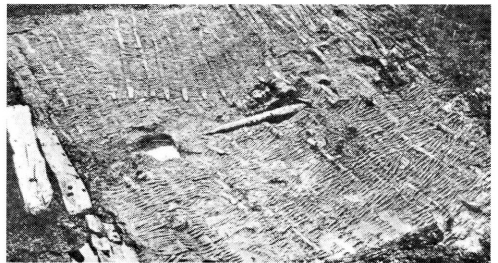
9. Reconstruction of Iron Age loom of type possibly used by Dobunnic weavers.

16. "Elsie M. Clifford, who excavated the pre-Roman tribal capital of the Dobunni, says: "The keeping of large flocks of sheep is indicated by the number of sheep bones that were found... That the Bagendon folk sheared their sheep and used the wool for clothing is suggested by the presence of pottery spindle-whorls, and parts of triangular clay loom-weights used in weaving... That the woollen industry in this district continued into Roman times is suggested by the voluminous cloak, which seems to be made of wool, worn by Philus in the relief carved on his grave-monument, a stone found at Cirencester, but now in the Gloucester Museum. The industry was later to develop into the famous Cotswold wool-trade." *Bagendon*, op.cit., p. 151.

17. For reconstruction of British war-chariot, made

with bent-ash frame, see Sir Cyril Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, 1958. fig. 40 and plate 6.

18. One of the earliest British written records of coppiced rods comes from the land of the Dobunni: "Pasture for 70 pigs in that wooded common... Which the country-folk call Wulfferdinleth [Wolverley, Worcs.] and 5 wagons full of good rods (*virgis*) and every year one oak for building... and wood... for the fire as necessary." Grant for Burgred, king of Mercia, AD 866, in W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, London, 1885-1893, 913. Oliver Rackham says: "The Romans knew about woodmanship in Italy; they even planted coppices and worked out the yields and the labour required (*Husbandry* VI.4). Columella, in the first century AD, recommended cutting chestnut underwood at five years' growth and oak at seven years': 'Areas of this plantation... have 2,800 stools (*capita*) of chestnut, which easily provide 12,000 poles per *iugerum*' (*Res rustica* IV. 33.4), in *The History of the Countryside*, 1986, p. 74.



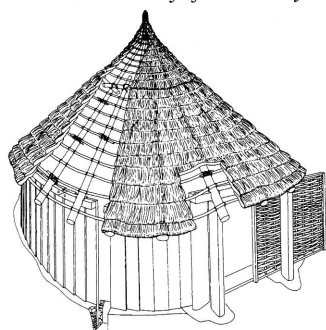
10. Wicker-work at Glastonbury lake-side village, solid evidence of Iron Age coppicing in west of England, on borders of Dobunni.

19. "The world's earliest evidence of woodmanship comes from the wooden track-ways buried in the peat of the Somerset Levels... The earliest, the Sweet Track, was already an elaborate structure of oak timber, large underwood poles of ash, lime, elm, oak, and alder, and small poles of hazel and holly. Many of the poles were undoubtedly grown for the purpose in a mixed coppice-wood very like the still-extant Cheddar Wood nine miles away. Later trackways are made of woven wattle hurdles made of large numbers of hazel rods, grown in an elaborate coppicing system designed to produce rods of exactly the same size (and therefore of different ages), because there were not then metal tools with which to split the thick ones. The rods may have been a by-product of the growing of hazel leaves as a crop... Such hurdle-ways continue into the

Bronze and Iron Ages; the wattle hurdles still made in Somerset are a 6000-year-old industry.” O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, 1986, p. 73.

20. Dendrochronological dating of Sweet Track wood show the timbers were felled during the winter of 3807-3806 BC (*Antiquity*, vol. 64, 1990, pp. 210-220). “It showed that the Sweet Track was the oldest-known timber trackway in the world, and that it was built at the very start of the Neolithic period.” Dr Francis Pryor, *Britain BC*, 2003, p. 133.

21. O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, p. 382.



11. Reconstruction of Iron Age plank-built house with movable wattle door.

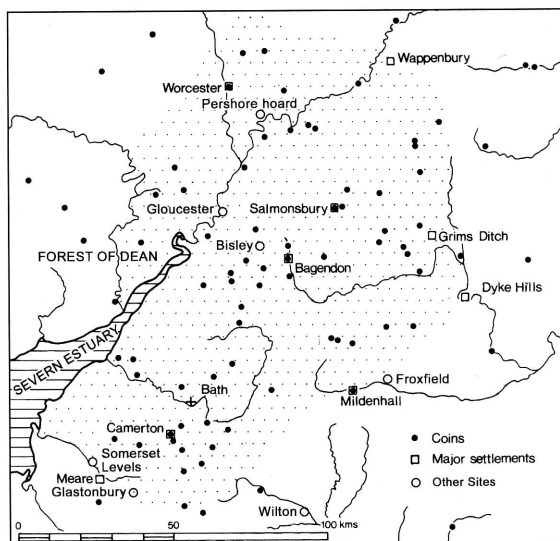
22. “Their half-timbered huts had walls with stone foundations and stone floors; wooden posts supported walls of wattle and daub; and roofs were probably thatched.” *Bagendon*, op.cit., p. 151.

23. Deer devour coppiced ash that has been left unfenced. O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, p. 140.

24. British *onno* ‘ash-tree’, Gaulish *onno* ‘ash-tree’, Welsh *onn* ‘ash-tree’, Cornish *onnen* ‘ash-tree’, Old Irish *huinn* ‘ash-tree’, Breton *onn*, *oun* ‘ash-tree’. Dr Kenneth Jackson favours ‘ash-tree’ as the meaning of *Onnum*, the Roman fort at Halton Chesters, Northumberland (*Journal of Roman Studies* 38 (1948), p. 57). *Oma*, an unidentified Roman site in Hampshire or Sussex, may also be translated as ‘ash-tree’, though other options are possible. A.L.F. Rivet and Colin Smith say: “Williams notes the frequency with which trees are associated with river-names. This etymology for both British names [*Onnum* and *Oma*] is, therefore, possible; the ash grows both on Hadrian’s Wall and in Hampshire; and the tree is commonly used in Anglo-Saxon toponymy [e.g. Ash, Ashampstead, Ashbocking, Ashbourne, Ashbrittle, Ashburton, Ashbury, Ashby, Ashcombe, Ashdon, Ashdown, Ashen, Ashendon,

Ashfield, Ashford, Ashill, Ashington, Ashley, Ashmansworth, Ashmore, Ashorne, Ashover, Ashreighney, Ashtead, Ashton, Ashurst, Ashwater, Ashwell, Ashwick]. However, we have no clear evidence of the use of a name for ‘ash’ in Celtic toponymy in other regions in ancient times” (*The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 1981, p. 431). If by ‘other regions’ Rivet and Smith mean other parts of Britain, this is true; and I’d suggest that Celtic ash-names haven’t survived because they’ve been replaced by Anglo-Saxon equivalents. If, however, Rivet and Smith mean other parts of Europe, this simply isn’t true. Xavier Delamarre lists examples of where Celtic place-names for ‘ash’ have survived: Onay, Aunat, Aunay-en-Bazois in France; and Onnex in Switzerland (*Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, 2003, p. 242). Not many, I agree, but there may be more. Another meaning for the second syllable of Dobunni could be ‘water’ or ‘waters’, -unn- possibly being cognate with the Gaulish *unna* (see Delamarre, p. 324).

25. British *dubo* ‘black’, Gaulish *dubus*, *dubis* ‘black’, Welsh *du* ‘black’, Old Welsh *dub* ‘black’, Breton *du* ‘black’, Irish *dub* ‘black’ (hence *Dubo-lindon*, Dublin). In southern Scotland we have an unidentified Roman site, *Dubabissum*, ‘place on the dark water’ (Rivet & Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, p. 340-341). *Dub* is also the source of several Celtic river-names such as the Dove in Derbyshire, the Dovey (*Dyf*) in Wales and the Dheune, Douyne and Dhuine in France (X. Delamarre, *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, pp. 152-153).



12. The territory of the Dobunni showing major settlements, other sites mentioned in text and where Dobunnian coins have been found. Based on map by B.Cunliffe.

26. Elsie Clifford is uncertain if the name 'Dobunni' is Belgic or earlier (*Bagendon*, op. cit., p. 42). So is Christopher Hawkes who says: "It still cannot be decided whether the name Dobunni...came from that native element, or was borne by the Belgic newcomers themselves" (*Bagendon*, p. 49). A.L.F. Rivet and Colin Smith won't commit themselves either on the derivation of Dobunni, saying: "This is unknown. The name seems to have no parallels except possibly in the devine name **Alanto-duba* to which Holder draws attention in *CIL* V.4934, also of unknown meaning" (*The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, pp. 339-340). Bearing in mind that we don't know what the people of this territory actually called themselves and that we rely on Roman texts and inscriptions, my suggested *Dub-onni* doesn't seem too distant from *Do-bunni* (as it's usually pronounced today). Curiously, and possibly coincidentally, the site of the ancient tribal capital was until recent times called Bonny Common (Elsie Clifford, *Bagendon*, op.cit., p. 2, quoting Rev. G.E. Rees, *History of Bagendon*, 1932, p. 51). Note also High Onn, Staffs., river Onny in Salop and rivulet Onny in Herefs., all meaning 'ash'. If my interpretation of the name Dobunni as 'black-ash people' is

misguided, then I might propose 'people of the dark waters' as an alternative, which could be rationalised as a reference to the deep, dark waters of the rivers Severn (*Sabrina*) and Avon (*Abona*).

Picture credits

1. Drawings by Jane Bottomley. 2a. Ward, *Cylinder Seals of Western Asia*, 1910. 2b. Eve takes the fruit from the mouth of the serpent, *Codex vigilanus*, San Lorenzo del Escorial, Spain. 2c. Illustration by The Bridgewater Book Company, in Carol Rudd, *Flower Essences-An Illustrated Guide*. 3. Lancelot Lengyel, *l'Art Gaulois dans les Médailles*, pl.x, no.107. 4. and 11., Barry Cunliffe, *Danebury Hillfort*, fig. 79, drawn by Mike Rouillard, and fig. 48, drawn by Christina Unwin. 5. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, fig.5.1. 6. Chris Rudd list 23, no.37. 7. Paul Robinson, after B. Phillips & M. Henig, Chris Rudd list 53, p.3. 8. Photo:Gloucester City Museum, in J. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*, pl. 66. 9. and 10., D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in Lowland Britain*, fig.21a and pl.xvii, photo: W. Tully. 12. Based on Barry Cunliffe's map, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (1991), fig. 10.

Chris Rudd List 72, November 2003