



Celtic Belief Systems, Tribal Organisation, and the Economy of Britain (before, during, and after Roman rule)

ABSTRACT

This report synthesises archaeological and historical scholarship on (1) belief and ritual in Iron Age and Roman Britain, (2) how tribal polities were organised and how they changed under Rome, and (3) economic structures before the conquest, through the Roman period, and into post-Roman Britain. It prioritises academic publications and major heritage syntheses, and it includes perspectives associated with Stuart Laycock's work on late Roman and post-Roman Britain. Key points (high confidence): 'Celtic religion' in Britain was not a single uniform system. Practice varied regionally and locally, and much of what we can say rests on archaeology (structured deposition, shrines, sanctuaries, iconography) rather than indigenous texts (Historic England 2018; Aldhouse-Green 2018). Across Britain there is continuity in ritual habits (e.g., watery deposition, boundary/liminal sites) alongside major change under Rome: new temple forms, epigraphy, and interpretatio Romana (equating local gods with Roman deities) appear unevenly, influenced by military zones, towns, and elite networks (Historic England 2018; Aldhouse-Green 2018). 'Tribes' were political communities (often client-based confederations) rather than fixed ethnic units. Power was personal and dynastic in many southern kingdoms, visible in coinage and elite centres (oppida) in the century before AD 43 (Creighton 2000/2009). There is clear evidence for intense cross-Channel contact with northern Gaul in the Late Iron Age (coins, pottery, styles, people). Whether this reflects large-scale migration after Caesar's campaigns is debated; many researchers now emphasise mobility and exchange over a single 'invasion' model (Lamb 2018; Creighton 2000/2009). The Roman conquest intensified monetisation, long-distance supply, and specialised production, but the 'Roman economy' in Britain was always regionally uneven. After the early fifth century, coin supply and state structures contracted sharply, yet new high-resolution environmental evidence suggests some industrial activity (e.g., metals) continued in parts of Britain for longer than older narratives allowed (Reece 2012; Esmonde-Cleary 1989; Loveluck et al. 2025).

1. Scope and method

Chronological scope: Later Iron Age (c. 200 BC-AD 43), Roman Britain (AD 43-c. 410), and post-Roman Britain (fifth to seventh centuries, with a brief glance beyond).

Evidence base: archaeology (sites, deposits, material culture), numismatics, epigraphy and iconography, and limited Classical/late antique texts. Because Iron Age Britain left no comparable written theological canon, 'belief' is approached through practice and material traces.

Note on the term 'Celtic': many scholars caution that 'Celtic' can hide regional diversity in Iron Age Britain. In this report it is used as a convenient shorthand for Brittonic-speaking Iron Age communities, not as a claim of cultural uniformity (Sims-Williams 2025).

2. Belief systems and ritual practice in Britain

2.1 What we can and cannot know

For Iron Age Britain, most direct descriptions of Druids and ritual come from Greco-Roman authors with their own agendas. Archaeology therefore carries the interpretive weight: patterned deposition (especially in watery places), sacred enclosures, shrine structures, human/animal remains in special contexts, and later, Romano-British inscriptions and temple architecture (Historic England 2018).

A useful working model is 'religion as practice': repeated acts that create social order, communicate with powers beyond the human, and mark boundaries (life/death, community/outside, land/water). Material traces often record the acts (deposition, building, feasting) rather than the theology behind them.

2.2 Shared themes across Britain

Across regions, several recurring themes appear in later prehistoric and Roman-period evidence:

- Liminal places: watery zones (rivers, bogs, springs), boundaries, and thresholds repeatedly attract votive deposition and sanctuary construction.
- Structured deposition: deliberate placement of weapons, tools, cauldrons, coins, and personal items in ways that suggest offering rather than disposal.
- Ancestry and place: burial, curated human remains, and re-use of ancient monuments point to deep time and ancestral claims on land.
- Sacral kingship and elite display: in the Late Iron Age south and east, coin iconography and elite centres suggest rulers presenting authority through mythic and religious language (Creighton 2000/2009).
- Syncretism under Rome: local gods persist but are re-framed through Roman names, imagery, and temple forms; the mix differs strongly by locality (Aldhouse-Green 2018; Historic England 2018).

2.3 How belief and practice differed across Britain

Variation is best understood as a mosaic shaped by environment, political networks, and the degree of Roman military and urban presence:

- South and east (closer to the Continent) show earlier coin-using dynasties, stronger cross-Channel connectivity, and faster uptake of Roman material forms after AD 43; religious change here often tracks elite and urban contexts (Creighton 2000/2009).
- Military frontiers (north and west) show distinctive 'religious ecologies': forts, vici, and supply routes introduce diverse cults (including imported deities), while local practice persists in rural landscapes; inscriptions and altars are comparatively common in some military zones (Historic England 2018).
- Wetland-rich landscapes (e.g., fens, river valleys) often produce dense evidence of watery offerings; these practices also exist elsewhere but preservation biases are important (Historic England 2018).
- Local goddesses/gods and cult titles vary strongly by region, and the same deity may appear under different spellings or paired with Roman equivalents; 'one Britain, one pantheon' does not fit the evidence (Aldhouse-Green 2018).

2.4 Druids and 'Celtic' priesthood

Druids are best treated as a learned class described by outsiders rather than a clearly visible archaeological 'priesthood'. Their roles (law, arbitration, education, ritual) are plausible, but linking them to particular monuments (e.g., Stonehenge) is not supported by evidence (Historic England 2018). For



writing, Druids work best when grounded in functions: mediating disputes, safeguarding tradition, overseeing rites at specific sacred places, and negotiating with elites.

3. Tribal organisation and political change

3.1 What a 'tribe' was in Iron Age Britain

Classical authors use 'tribe' as a convenient label for political communities. Archaeology and numismatics suggest a spectrum: from small kin-based groups and local territories to larger confederations and kingdoms. In the south and east especially, power often looks dynastic and personal, with coinage advertising rulers and identities (Creighton 2000/2009).

Common features of many tribal polities:

- Territory: claims were made through settlement patterns, monument reuse, and boundary shrines.
- Clientage: alliances and obligations between households, warbands, and elite lineages.
- Assemblies and feasting: political negotiation embedded in hospitality, gift exchange, and ritualised gatherings.
- Warbands: armed retinues as both military force and status display.

3.2 Did Celts from Gaul come to Britain after Caesar conquered Gaul?

There are three overlapping processes to separate: (a) long-term mobility and exchange across the Channel, (b) episodes of migration or elite movement, and (c) Roman-period movement under imperial control.

Late Iron Age evidence shows sustained connections with northern Gaul and Belgic regions: imported pottery and goods, Gallo-Belgic coinage, and shared elite styles. Some scholars allow for limited migration or elite displacement in the later first century BC, possibly linked to Roman pressure in Gaul, but many now emphasise two-way mobility and exchange rather than a single 'Belgic invasion' narrative (Lamb 2018).

In other words: yes, people certainly moved from Gaul to Britain in the decades around Caesar, but the scale is uncertain. The best-supported picture is a highly connected Channel zone in which traders, hostages, mercenaries, marriage partners, and ambitious elites moved in both directions (Creighton 2000/2009; Lamb 2018).

Under Rome (after AD 43), movement increases again but in different forms: soldiers recruited from across the empire, officials, merchants, and enslaved people held in bondage, alongside local mobility to towns, markets, and military supply nodes (Historic England 2018).

3.3 Rome and the remaking of 'tribes'

Roman administration converted many polities into civitates (administrative districts) with capitals, councils, and tax responsibilities. This did not erase local identities, but it changed how power worked: legal frameworks, land tenure, and elite display shifted toward Roman forms (Millet 1990).

Stuart Laycock has argued that late Roman Britain should be read through continuing and resurgent tribal conflict and factionalism, rather than a single story of 'Roman order' collapsing into an external invasion. Whether or not one accepts all aspects of his model, it has been influential in reframing post-Roman Britain as a landscape of competing power blocs and negotiated identities (Laycock 2008).

4. Economy: before, during, and after Rome

4.1 Before AD 43: exchange, status goods, and regional specialism

Most communities were agrarian, oriented around mixed farming and local exchange, but with important specialisms: salt production, ironworking, and long-distance trade in prestige goods. In the south and east, coinage and imported goods indicate strong elite participation in continental networks (Creighton 2000/2009).

Economic characteristics often noted for the Late Iron Age:

- Reciprocity and gift exchange alongside market-like transactions.
- Regional 'ports of trade' and coastal nodes connecting to Armorica and northern Gaul.
- Elite-controlled production and redistribution (feasting, hospitality, tribute).
- Early monetisation in some kingdoms (coins as political messaging as much as currency).

4.2 Roman Britain: taxation, monetisation, and uneven development

Rome brought a fiscal state: taxes, requisitioning, and large institutions (army, towns, villas) that restructured demand. Coin supply, official weights/measures, and contracts made some transactions easier, but rural subsistence remained dominant for many households (Reece 2012; Millett 1990).

Economic development was uneven. Regions near forts and towns often show stronger market integration, craft specialisation, and imported goods, while other areas remained lightly 'Romanised' in material terms. This is one reason modern scholarship increasingly avoids a single 'Romanisation' curve for the whole island (Millett 1990).

4.3 After Rome: contraction, continuity, and new evidence

Traditional narratives emphasise sharp contraction after the early fifth century: the end of imperial taxation and centrally supplied coinage, and the decline of many towns and mass-produced goods. Numismatic work remains fundamental here: coin supply to Britain ended, and coin use changes markedly in the early fifth century (Reece 2012; Esmonde-Cleary 1989).

However, newer high-resolution environmental and geoarchaeological evidence complicates the idea of an immediate 'economic crash' everywhere. A major sediment-core study at Aldborough (Yorkshire) traces metal pollution across c. AD 345-1700 and suggests that some forms of iron and lead production continued into the fifth and sixth centuries, with later cycles of revival (Loveluck et al. 2025). This supports a model of regional variability: some zones experienced steep decline; others retained industrial and exchange networks longer.

By the later sixth and seventh centuries, economic centres and trade routes look different again, shaped by emerging kingdoms, new settlement patterns, and changing external links (including the North Sea world). The transition is best seen as reorganisation, not a single cliff-edge.

5. Notes for historical fiction and worldbuilding

If you want a believable 'Celtic' Britain, treat religion, politics, and economy as local and negotiated. Characters should argue about land boundaries, sacred obligations, and tribute; shrines should sit at crossings and edges; and trade should feel like relationships, not just 'markets'.

- Belief: show offerings, taboos, oaths, seasonal rites, and the way people read weather, water, and omens as communication.



- Politics: portray alliances as fragile, built through marriage, hostage-taking, gift-giving, and shared ritual rather than modern-style bureaucracy.
- Economy: anchor wealth in cattle, grain, salt, iron, and labour; coins appear as symbols and tools in some regions, not everywhere.
- Roman impact: focus on what changes daily life (tax demands, requisitioning, military supply, new building materials) and what persists (kin obligations, local sacred places).