



Sub-Roman Chester (Deva): Late 4th to 6th Century CE Archaeological and Historical Report

ABSTRACT

Why Deva/Chester remained important: The fortress's massive defences, strategic river position and established infrastructure made it an ideal base for post-Roman power. Brittonic elites could step into the spaces vacated by the legion and use them as royal halls, stores, and churches, maintaining a defended centre in a fragmenting political landscape. Who was there: After the legion's departure, the population comprised local Romano-British elites, their war-bands and households, clerics, craftsmen, and townsfolk, all inhabiting a much-reduced but still significant town inside and around the former fortress. Later, Anglian forces from Northumbria contested control of the city, culminating in the early seventh-century Battle of Chester. What went on there: Sub-Roman Chester combined the functions of stronghold, administrative centre, market, and harbour. Rural communities supplied food and raw materials; the elite households imported luxury goods via the Dee estuary. At the same time, the stone of Deva's tombs, barracks and amphitheatre were constantly quarried and reused to construct new halls, churches, and dwellings, while the Roman ramparts continued to define the city's form. Significance: Chester stands as a key example of how a Roman legionary base could evolve into a post-Roman town and royal centre. Its story illustrates continuity in urban occupation, adaptation of military architecture, and the persistence of long-distance trade and political authority in western Britain well beyond the end of formal Roman rule.

1. Setting and Background

Roman name: Deva Victrix (commonly Deva).

Later names: Caer Legion / Caerleon in Welsh tradition; 'city of the legions' in Bede's account of early 7th-century warfare.

Location: A sandstone bluff above a loop of the River Dee, controlling a major crossing point and access from inland Britain to the Irish Sea. The late- and post-Roman story of Chester begins from this strategic advantage: strong walls, a good harbour, and a fertile hinterland.

By the late fourth century Deva was still one of the three great legionary bases of Roman Britain (alongside York and Caerleon). Over the next two centuries it changed from an imperial garrison into a Brittonic stronghold and town, while its stone fabric was steadily cannibalised for new uses.

2. Late Roman Deva (c. 350–400 CE)

2.1 Garrison and Administration

In the later fourth century the Twentieth Legion (Legio XX Valeria Victrix) remained based at Deva. Coin finds and repair work to the defences indicate active occupation and ongoing maintenance of the fortress. Deva at this stage functioned as a regional military command centre for north-western Britain, a



logistical hub drawing supplies from the Dee valley and beyond, and a civil centre with a substantial civilian settlement outside the walls.

2.2 The Run-up to Withdrawal

Several key developments mark the end of Deva's formal role as a legionary fortress:

- In AD 383 the usurper Magnus Maximus removed troops from Britain for his continental campaign. Deva likely lost part or all of its legionary garrison at this point.
- Around AD 395–400 the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a late Roman 'army list', records units at various British sites but no longer lists a garrison at Deva, suggesting it had been dropped from the official frontier structure.
- By AD 410, Honorius's rescript instructing British civitates to look to their own defence marks the effective end of imperial responsibility.

By the early fifth century Deva was no longer a formal legionary base, but its massive walls, gates and many of its buildings continued to stand, and parts of the population remained in and around the fortress.

3. Continuity of Occupation: Was Chester Abandoned?

3.1 Imports and High-Status Occupation

Archaeology argues strongly against simple abandonment. Excavations within and just west of the fortress have produced evidence of continued high-status activity:

- Ribbed Late Roman amphora sherds of fifth–sixth-century date from Abbey Green inside the fortress.
- A possible Late Roman 'B' or Gaza-type amphora from Greyfriars' Court, west of the legionary walls.
- Evidence of specialised metalworking in iron and bronze in the same area, interpreted as high-status craft activity.

Amphorae matching those found at western 'royal' and ecclesiastical sites such as Tintagel and Whithorn. They typically contained wine, oil, or other luxury provisions from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Their presence at Chester suggests that part of the city remained an elite centre plugged into long-distance trade networks in the sub-Roman period.

3.2 Urban Pattern and Reuse of the Fortress

Although excavation coverage is limited, Chester probably followed patterns observed in other British towns:

- Large stone barracks and public buildings ceased to function as formal military spaces and were partially abandoned or adapted.
- Interiors were subdivided with timber buildings, yards, and small workshops, creating a more irregular, lower-density urban fabric within the old grid of streets.
- Population inside the walls shrank, but a smaller community continued to live and work amid the remains of the legionary base.

Taken together, this evidence supports a model of Deva as a 'recycled fortress'—no longer a full Roman garrison, but far from deserted.

4. Political Control: From Imperial Command to Brittonic Kings

There are no contemporary written records naming rulers in fifth–sixth-century Chester, but later sources and modern synthesis offer a plausible reconstruction.

- Welsh tradition remembers *Caer Legion* / *Caerleon* as an important British city, almost certainly Chester.
- Some modern scholars argue that Chester served as a *civitas*-capital or royal centre of Powys during the sub-Roman period.
- By the early seventh century, Bede describes a major battle near the *urbs legionum* ('city of the legions'), generally identified with Chester, in which Northumbrian forces fight Britons and their allies. This implies that a Brittonic kingdom still held the city up to around AD 616–617.

On this basis, a reasonable reconstruction is that after the collapse of imperial administration local Romano-British elites—probably ancestors of later kings of Powys—assumed control of the walled city. They used *Deva* as a royal stronghold and administrative centre, exploiting its ready-made defences and urban infrastructure. The power structure shifted from imperial governors and legionary legates to kings, war-leaders, and churchmen, but the physical setting remained the same.

5. Economy and Local Communities After Rome

5.1 Rural Hinterland

Under Roman rule, thousands of soldiers guaranteed demand for grain, meat, leather, and timber. After the legion's withdrawal the rural economy did not vanish. Farms in the Dee valley and the Cheshire plain continued to operate, now feeding a smaller urban population and a regional elite household rather than an imperial unit.

Some villa-style estates likely fragmented into smaller farmsteads, but the agricultural landscape remained in use. Chester's continued occupation allowed markets, fairs, and tribute-collection to function within the old walls, albeit on a reduced scale compared with the legionary heyday.

5.2 Trade and the Irish Sea Network

The amphora imports demonstrate that Chester remained engaged in long-distance trade:

- Sea-borne routes via the Dee estuary brought wine, oil, and high-status foodstuffs from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.
- Chester appears as a node in the 'Atlantic seaways', linking western Britain, Ireland, and the Mediterranean world even after the end of Roman administration.

This trade likely served the needs of a royal court and ecclesiastical establishments, indicating an economy that was smaller and more elite-focused than in Roman times but still outward-looking via the sea.

6. Urban and Architectural Change

6.1 Inside the Walls

Over the fifth–sixth centuries, the interior of the fortress underwent significant transformation:

- Some legionary buildings were adapted as residences for the ruling household, storage facilities, or craft workshops.
- Others collapsed or were gradually stripped for stone as demand for new construction materials arose.



- Timber halls, houses, and small churches were likely built within former courtyards and along the existing Roman streets, which continued to shape movement and property boundaries.

The overall plan of the city thus remained recognisably Roman, but occupation became patchier and more timber-based, with a mixed military-civilian character giving way to a wholly civilian and ecclesiastical one.

6.2 Outside the Walls

The extramural canabae or civilian settlement probably shrank, but parts remained occupied in the sub-Roman centuries. Small rural enclosures and farmsteads on the edges of the Roman town provided a continuum between urban and rural life, reinforcing Chester's role as both town and principal place for the surrounding countryside.

7. The Fate of the Stone: From Fortress to Quarry

7.1 Walls and Ramparts

The Roman defensive circuit itself continued to play a significant role in the city's life. Sections of the curtain wall and towers were maintained and patched, and in later centuries the medieval city walls were built largely on the line of the Roman defences, sometimes reusing substructures directly. The ramparts remained the physical framework of the city for over a millennium.

7.2 Tombstones and Repairs

Even before the end of imperial rule, the army was reusing stone. More than 150 Roman tombstones from Deva's cemeteries were incorporated into repairs to the north wall in the late Roman period, demonstrating deliberate quarrying of funerary monuments for structural purposes.

7.3 Internal Buildings as Quarries

After the end of regular military pay and centrally organised building programmes, disused barracks, bathhouses, and store buildings became convenient stone quarries. Their masonry was recycled into sub-Roman houses, halls, and churches within and near the fortress, and also transported to rural sites beyond the walls. Archaeologically this pattern appears in the form of robber trenches, truncated wall stubs and reused Roman blocks in later structures.

7.4 The Amphitheatre

The amphitheatre east of the fortress provides a particularly clear example. Large parts of its stonework were robbed during the early medieval period, with carved blocks and voussoirs incorporated into the fabric of St John's Church and the monastery of St Mary. This represents both practical reuse of building material and a symbolic transfer of space from Roman entertainment to Christian worship.

7.5 Waterfront and Later Building

Substantial Roman walls along the Roodee, often interpreted as quay or boundary structures, were likewise patched and reused rather than entirely dismantled. Over succeeding centuries, Roman stone appeared throughout Chester in the foundations of timber-framed houses, in crypts and towers, and in the masonry of early medieval and Norman churches. Deva's stone did not simply vanish; it migrated into the evolving urban fabric.

8. Chester in the 5th–6th Century



Bringing these strands together, the picture that emerges for sub-Roman Chester is one of transformation rather than collapse.

1. End of the Legion: Deva loses its formal legionary garrison and imperial pay, but its inhabitants do not abandon the site. The fortress ceases to be a cog in the imperial machine and becomes instead a regional stronghold.

2. British Stronghold and Civitas-Centre: Brittonic elites, probably associated with the kingdom of Powys, adopt the fortress as a royal centre and administrative hub. They occupy the same principia, barrack blocks, and granaries, now reinterpreted as halls, storehouses, and places of worship.

3. Smaller but Connected Economy: Local farms and workshops continue to supply the town and court. Amphora-borne luxuries from the Mediterranean indicate that Chester participates in the wider Irish Sea and western seaways trade network of the fifth–sixth centuries.

4. Transformation of the Built Environment: Military barracks and public buildings shift into mixed civilian use and then into quarries. New timber halls and churches rise within and beside old masonry shells, creating a hybrid landscape of Roman stone and post-Roman timber.

5. Prelude to the Battle of Chester: By the early seventh century, Chester remains important enough to be targeted by the expanding kingdom of Northumbria. Bede's account of a battle near the *urbs legionum* marks the final eclipse of British political control, but only after two centuries of post-Roman life within the Roman walls.

Sub-Roman Chester is therefore not a ghost-fortress but a recycled city: a place where Roman infrastructure, Brittonic kingship, Christian institutions, and Irish Sea trade intersect on the same sandstone bluff above the Dee.