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, 'solf' 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 Selgowon or Selgowon. In Welsh, the Brythonic 's' became an 'h' in many cases, so that 'hunf' 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 Hawick in Borders, and Tamshiel Rigg, south-east of Hawick.

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)**

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, Guendolau, and which has survived as modern Carwinley. The kingdom was bordered by Bernacia 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.

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

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 Arfderydd (Arderydd, Armterid, or even Atterith, and today known as Arthuret, near Longtown in Cumbria). The principle leader of the side opposing Guendlau is Rhydderch Hen of Alt Clut, most probably for territorial reasons.


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 Cymry). 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-Gwendoleu) 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.