

Gael Force: The Irish Conquest of Britain

► *‘Ba mór cumachta
Gaedel for Breatnaib,
ocus ní ba luga do-
threbtas Gaedil for muir
anair quam in Scotia,
ocus do-rónta a n-árusa
ocus a rigdúinte ann;
ocus bátar fon cumachta
sin ní cian iar tidecht do
Phátraic’.*

► ‘The Power of the Gael
over the British was
great, and the Gael lived
no less to the east of the
sea than in Ireland, and
their dwellings and royal
strongholds were made
there, and they held that
power for a long time
after Patrick’s coming’.

The Irish Conquest of Britain:

As conquests go, this is not a name encountered often. The Roman Conquest, the Norman Conquest, and the Anglo-Saxon Conquest all have their place in the history books. The Irish Conquest, however, is never used to describe the significant events taking place in huge swathes of western and northern Britain in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium.

We have already referred to the attacks on Roman Britannia by Gaels, Picts and Saxons. This process was to continue after their departure and eventually lead to Irish settlement on the island of Britain.

Evidence of Irish influence can be seen in the legacy of monuments, place names and actual living languages from the island of Britain.

The above quote was made by Cormac Mac Cuileannáin, Bishop of Cashel, who died in 908.

(from: Ó Muirchú, M, (1985), *The Irish Language*, Dublin, The Department of Foreign Affairs and Bord na Gaeilge).

Ogham Stones



- ▶ About 400 in total
- ▶ Most numerous in south west Ireland
- ▶ Also found in south-west Britain, Wales, Man and Scotland
- ▶ Pembrokeshire has more than the whole of Scotland

Ogham (or Ogam) stones are monuments containing inscriptions written predominantly, but not exclusively, in Primitive Irish (fourth – sixth centuries) or Old Irish (sixth – tenth centuries). There are about 400 of them in all. Some are believed to date back to the fourth century, and these represent the earliest known examples of a Gaelic (or Goidelic) language. The bulk of them, however, date from the fifth and sixth centuries. They are found in most parts of Ireland, but the heaviest concentration is in the southern counties of Kerry, Cork and Waterford.

On the other side of the Irish Sea they are also found in what is now Cornwall, Devon, Wales, the Isle of Man, and Scotland, where they bear witness to Irish expansion and settlement in the centuries following the collapse of Roman control. Due to the proximity of these areas to Ireland, their location should occasion no surprise. There is only one known example from England east of Devon, completely isolated from all the others, in the former Roman town of Silchester in modern day Hampshire. As there is no doubt that northern Britain was subject to vigorous Irish settlement in this period, the relatively small number located there (there are more in Pembrokeshire than in the whole of Scotland) suggests that the stones were a product of the south west of Ireland, rather than Ireland as a whole.

Image courtesy of BM images:

<http://www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=00037373001&imagex=1&searchnum=0002>

Settlement in Western Britain



- ▶ Three Peninsulas
- ▶ Cornwall and Devon
- ▶ South-west Wales
- ▶ North-west Wales
- ▶ Led to founding of Dyfed and Brycheiniog
- ▶ Some Irish words found in Welsh
- ▶ Assimilated by local population

The Irish established three colonies in the peninsulas of western Britain.

In the extreme southwest, the pattern is clear enough, but the details are less certain. There seem to have been two phases of Irish colonisation, one into east Cornwall and west Devon in the fourth or fifth centuries, and another into west Cornwall in the sixth. The colonists were probably from east Munster. The number of Ogham stones in this region is notable (about 10) but not as significant as in our second peninsula, in what is now south Wales.

Here, the kingdoms of Dyfed and Brycheiniog were of Irish origin (Brecon bears the name of an Irish-born prince called Brychan). That is not to say that the population was wholly or even predominantly Irish, especially when considering the eventual assimilation of Irish speakers by the Brittonic population. Rather, the significant influence held by them was sufficient to ensure a period where both Gaelic and Brittonic were spoken. The Oxford History of Ireland (1992, p.7) notes that according to Professor Kenneth Jackson, “it seems a certain fact that, at some time in the late Roman period, Irish colonies from East Munster settled in South Wales, Cornwall and Devon, and from one of them there sprang a line of kings of south-west Wales who were still ruling there in the tenth century”. This does not, however, mean that Gaelic was still being spoken here until that late. It has also been suggested that Irish, rather than Anglo-Saxon pressure was the catalyst for Brittonic migration to Armorica in northwest Gaul (more on this in the unit ‘Putting the Great into Great Britain’).

The black dots in the above image show the distribution of Ogham stones, and give some indication of Irish presence at the time. (Courtesy of Leefeni de Karik).

Expulsion from Gwynedd



- ▶ Less Irish influence in Gwynedd than further south
- ▶ Legend of Cunedda expelling them
- ▶ Llŷn Peninsula name shows links to Leinster

In the last of the three peninsulas, in Gwynedd in northwest Wales, the Irish came not from Munster, but from Leinster, a fact shown by the name of the Llŷn peninsula itself, and Porth Dinllaen, both of which are cognate with the 'Lein' of Leinster. Although Gaelic may also have been spoken by small sections of this community for some centuries, the Irish did not have the same influence here as they did further south. A ninth century story by Nennius tells us how Cunedda brought an army from the north of Britain to expel the Irish from Gwynedd. Included in this army were eight of Cunedda's sons and one grandson, who went on to found a variety of kingdoms. Cunedda laid claim to Gwynedd, his son Ceredig to Ceredigion, Edern to Edeirnion and so on. However, the ninth century is a good four centuries after the supposed event and Gildas, writing in the sixth century, makes no mention of them. Origin myths were a very convenient way to associate lands with individuals (including one where Britain is claimed to be named after Brutus), and an equally convenient way to lay historical claim to them. Subsequently, they should be taken with a realistic pinch of salt. Putting individuals to one side however, there is no reason to doubt the pattern of events, namely that Gwynedd was settled by Irish colonists, and that these were either repelled by Britons from the north seeking to regain control, or else assimilated into the local community.

Despite several centuries of influence, the Irish language was not destined to prevail in any of the three areas above. The same cannot be said of those which follow.

Image from 'The History of Wales' website <https://thehistoryofwales.typepad.com/t/3.html>

Settlement on the Isle of Man



- Part of the same story as western and northern Britain
- Gaelic language replaced Brittonic
- Outlived the Viking influence

Whether or not the Isle of Man, situated approximately halfway between Britain and Ireland, should be considered part of Britain in the first place is debatable, but events here reflect those of the British mainland, and can rightly be considered part of the same story.

According, once again, to Professor Kenneth Jackson (*Language and History in Early Britain*, Edinburgh University Press, 1953, p. 173), it seems that the Isle of Man was home to Brittonic speakers before the arrival of Gaelic speakers. As in the western peninsulas of Britain, a period of Brittonic/Gaelic bilingualism is postulated. Unlike the situation in Cornwall and Wales, however, it was the Gaelic language which eventually prevailed. It was sufficiently established to outlive the Norse controlled Kingdom of Man and the Isles between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, which contained Man itself and many of the Hebridean islands of western Scotland.

The language spoken on the island was part of a wider common Gaelic-speaking area until as late as the thirteenth century, but by the fifteenth century had become a separate language in its own right.

Image courtesy of Copernicus Sentinel-2, ESA - <https://scihub.copernicus.eu/dhus/#/home>, CC BY-SA 3.0-igo, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=78481390>

Settlement in Northern Britain



- ▶ Led to the kingdom of Scotland
- ▶ Very linguistically diverse
- ▶ Five languages reduced to two
- ▶ Highland/Lowland split

A similar process to that of the Isle of Man, albeit on a much larger scale, took place in northern Britain, and of all the areas subject to the 'Irish Conquest', there can be no doubt that this was the most successful, as it would ultimately lead to the establishment of the kingdom of Scotland.

Prior to its settlement by Gaelic speaking Scots and English speaking Angles, the land to the north of the Antonine Wall had been occupied by Picts, and the land between the two walls by Britons. By the sixth century, northern Britain had become the most diverse part of the island, both ethnically and linguistically. Four languages, namely Pictish, Brittonic, Gaelic and English were all spoken there for the bulk of the second half of the first millennium, with a fifth, Norse, being added to the mix from around the turn of the ninth century. All of these groups would regularly fight against each other, and sometimes amongst themselves.

Ironically, the older, more established languages of Brittonic and Pictish would be lost first. Broadly speaking, Brittonic lost ground to English, and Pictish to Gaelic. Gaelic itself would eventually lose some of its ground to the English dialect of southern Scotland, leading to a geographical and linguistic Highland/Lowland split, which would persist for centuries.

Image courtesy of Angus McLellan.

The Stronghold of Strathclyde



In northern Britain in the early medieval era

- Irish move in to Pictish territory
- Angles move in to Brittonic territory
- Britons retain Strathclyde

As early as 547, Northumbrian Angles had moved into what is now the Lothian area of southeast Scotland, and established the kingdom of Bernicia. This they did at the expense of the Britons, and although a tragedy from the Brittonic point of view, the conflicts between the British and the Angles in this area led to the works of Taliesin and Aneirin, and what are believed to be the earliest examples of 'Welsh' literature (more on this in the unit 'German Bite'). Confusingly then, we have a situation where the earliest 'Welsh' poets mourn the loss of land in what is now southern Scotland to the English.

Following the loss of the Lothian area, the British north of Hadrian's Wall were restricted to Strathclyde, which covered the south west of Scotland from the mouth of the Clyde to Cumbria. The capital of Strathclyde was based at Dumbarton Rock, and the word Dumbarton, or Dùn Breatainn in Gaelic, itself means "fortress of the Britons". Strathclyde had already been converted to Christianity by this time, and the region is renowned for producing some of the most important Christian Saints of the era, including St Ninian, who built the first known stone church in Britain in Galloway at around the turn of the fifth century, St Kentigern, contemporary of St David and St Columba, and sixth century patron of Strathclyde, and of course St Patrick, a native of Britain who devoted thirty years of his life to converting the people of Ireland to Christianity, eventually to become its patron saint. In many ways, St Columba, a native of Ireland, would later go on to 'return the favour' in northern Britain, establishing the monastery on Iona in the sixth century.

Image: A modern view of Dumbarton Rock, showing its strategic position on the mouth of the Clyde (courtesy of Para).

The Founding of Dál Riata



- Founded at the end of the fifth century
- Land on both sides of the north channel
- Expansion under Áedán mac Gabráin
- Power shifts between Scots and Picts

As far as the expansion of Gaelic is concerned, according to the Irish Annals, Fergus Mór mac Eirc founded the Gaelic speaking kingdom of Dál Riata in Argyll in about 500 AD. The exact year may of course vary, but is of little importance as far the actual process is concerned. Initially this kingdom had lands on both sides of the sea, in Argyll and the Inner Hebrides in Britain, and in northeast Ulster in Ireland. The North Channel separating these is only twelve miles long at its shortest point. Áedán mac Gabráin, became king of Dál Riata in 574, and expanded his kingdom in northern Britain aggressively. However, the traffic was not all one way. He was defeated decisively by Aethelfrith of Northumbria in 603 at the Battle of Degsastan. Later, in 642, Domnall Brecc, king of Dál Riata, was killed by the British King Owain of Strathclyde at the Battle of Strathcarron.

The part of Dál Riata located in northern Britain would have been established in or on the edge of Pictish territory, and despite initial expansion in the sixth and seventh centuries, when Dál Riata exercised control over the Picts, for much of this period the reverse was true. The Picts, led by Bidei, also won a decisive victory over the Angles at Dunnichen (Nechtansmere) in 685, putting a permanent halt to Northumbrian ambitions north of the Forth. The Britons, meanwhile, won a battle against the Picts at Mugdock near Strathblane in 750, giving some breathing space for Strathclyde to survive until the eleventh century.

The image above show the approximate area of early Dál Riata in light green.

Settlement in Northern Britain



- ▶ Viking pressure forces Picts and Scots to cooperate
- ▶ Unified kingdom of Alba formed at end of ninth century
- ▶ Includes mainland Scotland north of the Antonine Wall

The arrival of the Vikings in the late eighth century caused a major headache for all four of the other groups. At Fortriu in 839 they defeated a combined force of Picts and Scots. This would lead to increased cooperation between them, and the establishment of the Kingdom of Alba in the year 900. Despite the Pictish involvement in the foundation of this kingdom, the Gaelic language expanded at the expense of Pictish via Gaelic Christianity and intermarriage between Picts and Gaels. The name of the Picts gradually disappeared and the Gaelic language of the Scots became the dominant language in Britain north of the Forth and Clyde.

From here the kingdom spread southwards into Strathclyde, and, following the death of King Owain the Bald in 1018, Strathclyde was incorporated into the Kingdom of Alba. At the same time, Anglian Bernicia, north of the Tweed, would also become part of the new kingdom, following a Scottish victory over the Northumbrians at the Battle of Carham.

Eventually, only the name of the Gaelic speaking Scots would remain in the name of the kingdom that would be called Scotland in the English language and Scotia in Latin. Malcolm II, who lived as King of Alba, would die, in 1034, as King of Scotia, the title recorded in his obituary.

Image: A seventeenth century reconstructed portrait of Kenneth MacAlpin (*Cináed mac Ailpin*) usually recognised as the first King of Scots from 843 – 858. It is part of the Royal Collection at the Palace of Holyrood House. Kenneth's kingdom would have been rather smaller than the current Scotland, including only the land to the north of Strathclyde (roughly north of the old Antonine Wall).

Gael Force: Legacy



- ▶ Scottish Gaelic and all connected links
- ▶ Manx language and all connected links
- ▶ Place-names and personal names
- ▶ Global diaspora

In the thirteenth century, Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic all shared a common 'classical' literary tradition, but it then started to diverge into western (Irish) and eastern (Manx and Scottish) varieties. In the fifteenth century, Scottish Gaelic diverged further from Manx, and by the seventeenth century, the three-way split that we recognise today was fully in place. Unfortunately, since that time, all three languages have gone into decline, in each case as a result of pressure from English.

The eastern varieties of Goidelic, as independent languages of the modern era, have their origins in the Irish Conquest of (parts of) Britain and are a direct consequence of it, having being introduced to their new territories by Gaels from Ireland. In their Manx, and especially Scottish Gaelic forms, they have spread around the world, especially in the case of personal names.

Image: the McDonald's 'Golden Arches', official logo of the McDonald's corporation.