

HPCS5024/6024

True Brits

The Story of the Britons

This module will look at the story of the **Britons**, that is, the **Brittonic** speaking peoples of Britain and Brittany, from the earliest known use of various forms of these names, until the medieval period, when the parent language can be said to have finally split into its daughter languages.

These represent one half of today's **Celtic** peoples. However, it is important to recognise that the Britons were for many centuries a distinct entity, who can in certain circumstances be inappropriately submerged under this wider Celtic label. It is hoped that this module will go some small way towards realigning this imbalance. Particular attention will be paid to the early medieval period, when one language and people were in the process of ultimately dividing into three.

The term Britons here will have an ethnolinguistic, rather than a geographical definition, in that it will refer to those who were known or believed to have spoken the Brittonic language or one of the daughter languages descended from it, and not other groups of people who are, or were, geographically present in Britain.

The 'True' of 'True Brits' is a play on the common modern usage of that term, albeit in a very different context, and has the meaning 'First' or 'Original'. There is no suggestion that there are any such things as 'False Brits'. ****

From Pretaniké to Britannia



- ▶ The Britons, as here defined, span a historical period of 25 centuries
- ▶ Pretaniké, island home of the Pretani, is first noted by Pytheas in the fourth century BCE
- ▶ Pretaniké and Pretani were Latinised by the Romans into Britannia and Britanni respectively
- ▶ The Britanni spoke a language, which, in Modern English, is called Brittonic, Brythonic, or sometimes simply British

In the fourth century BCE, around the year 325, the Greek traveller Pytheas, based at the Greek colony of Massalia (Marseilles), circumnavigated the islands which, from a purely geographical perspective, would be known for many years as the **British Isles**. Indeed, this term has its origins in the names noted by him.

Several of the individual islands within this archipelago had names of their own. The largest island, for example, was known as **Albion**, while Ireland, the second largest, was called **Ierne**. The name passed down for this group of islands as a whole was **Pretaniké**, and their inhabitants were labelled the **Pretani**. This is the first known use of these terms, which Pytheas probably, but not definitely, obtained from local sources. They suggest, rather obviously, a P-Celtic, rather than a Q-Celtic origin, and also imply that these two branches were already separate as early as the fourth century BCE. As an example of the P/Q distinction, the Welsh (P-Celtic) name for the Picts of northern Britain was **Prydyn** while the Irish (Q-Celtic) cognate name for the same people was **Cruthin**. Prydyn, in fact, may be derived from Pretani.

Barry Cunliffe, in his book *Britain Begins* (p. 4) claims that Pretani was the name used by the people to describe themselves, although we certainly cannot assume from this that all of the islands contained one uniform people. Sadly, we have only fragments of copies of Pytheas' account, not the original. Nevertheless, the source is clearly very old, as other classical authors, such as Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, were using it as a reference as long ago as the first century BCE.

To the Romans, **Pretaniké**, and **Pretani** became, in their Latinised forms, **Britannia** and **Britanni** respectively, and these were the terms used by Julius Caesar in his *De Bello Gallico*. Over time, and especially after the Roman conquest, Britannia came to be used instead of Albion as a name solely for the largest island, rather than the entire archipelago, while Ierne had been Latinised to **Hibernia**. ****

The image in the slide is Willem Blaeu's *Insulae Albion et Hibernia*, based on Ptolemy's map of the second century CE.

What's in a name?



- ▶ There are still over a million speakers of Brittonic languages today
- ▶ The meaning of 'British' has undergone many changes over the years
- ▶ The formation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain led to British becoming largely synonymous with 'English'
- ▶ The 'Ancient Britons' became increasingly labelled as 'Celts'

The languages descended from the original Brittonic language are still spoken today by just over a million people, and up until the early modern period, the labels 'Britons' and 'British' would have referred to them. It is particularly important to remember this when examining works from the early medieval period, when, for example, the 'English' (i.e. of the Anglo-Saxon variety) and the 'British' were two very different peoples, and were acknowledged as such by themselves and outsiders alike.

Terms with the meaning 'Little Britain' have, at various times and in various contexts, been used to describe both Ireland and Brittany, in order to distinguish them from 'Great Britain'. In the case of Ireland, Ptolemy used the label *mikra Brettania* in his work *Almagest* in a purely geographical context, that is, as a name for the smaller of the two main 'Britannic islands'. In the case of Brittany, however, it has a rather different meaning, perhaps best summed up as 'smaller land of the Britons'. There is therefore an ethnic dimension to its use here. This distinction is important to remember as the 'Bretons' were also 'Britons', whereas the Irish were not. To this day, in the French language, Brittany is *Bretagne*, while Great Britain is *Grande Bretagne*.

The early modern period, however, and the year 1707 in particular, saw events take place which would alter the common usage and understanding of the labels Briton and British for centuries to come. The first was the formation of a kingdom which would see the entire island of Britain under one ruler for the first time in 1200 years. This new Kingdom of Great Britain meant that 'British' was now applied to all within its boundaries, regardless of previous ethnic differences, including the Scots and the English. The second was the publication of *Archaeologia Britannica* by the linguist and scholar Edward Lhuyd. He, quite correctly, recognised affinities between the ancient British and Irish languages. His discovery, though, would lead to the increased use of the term Celtic at the expense of the more traditional names.

Image: A wood cutting of a brass coin issued in the second century during the rule of Hadrian. It shows the figure of Britannia, the personification of Britain, sitting on a rock, with an implication that Hadrian had brought order to Britain. From *A Dictionary of Roman Coins, Republican and Imperial* (1889).

Who the Britons were not:



- ▶ Not the first ever inhabitants of the island
- ▶ Not the people who built Stonehenge
- ▶ Not the Celtae
- ▶ Not the English
- ▶ Not the Scots

The Britons are the earliest known **historical** inhabitants of the island of Britain. This does not mean, though, that they were the first people ever to live there, which they certainly were not.

Pytheas' use of the names **Pretaniké** to describe the island, and **Pretani** to describe the people, would imply that they were present in the fourth century BCE.

However, the earliest human remains from what is now called Britain date from some 30000 years ago, and although devoid of people for large periods during the Ice Age, the land has been constantly inhabited for about 12000 years.

It did not become an island until about 6000 BCE, and the Britons were not responsible for the construction of something as comparatively recent as Stonehenge at around 2500 BCE. *****

Image: Stonehenge, courtesy of Diego Delso

Who the Britons were:



- ▶ First-known **historical** inhabitants of the island of Britain
- ▶ Named as ***Pretani*** by Pytheas in the fourth century BCE
- ▶ Occupied the bulk, if not all, of the island during the Iron Age and Roman periods
- ▶ First described in the historical record by Julius Caesar in his raids of 55 and 54 BCE
- ▶ Gradually restricted to upland areas following the Romans' departure

So who were the Britons?

They were, quite simply, the people who occupied the bulk, if not all, of the island of Britain before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons and Scots.

Although it should be used with care, the most appropriate label that could be given in the English language to describe the Britons is the name **‘Welsh’**. This, after all, was the name that would be given to them by the Anglo-Saxons, who called them *Waelas*. It can be seen in the *Wal* at the beginning of **Wales** and in the *Wall* at the end of **Cornwall**, as well as in the personal names *Welsh*, *Walsh* and *Wallace*, and names of towns such as *Walton*, *Walcot*, *Walden* and *Wallasey*.

Today, of course, the name ‘Welsh’ is restricted to natives of Wales, and would not necessarily be accepted by, say, a Cornishman (despite Cornwall being known as West Wales in the early medieval period). However, to the early English, all Britons, from Kent to Cornwall to Edinburgh, would have been ‘Welsh’, and it is this more general name which gives the clearest indication as to who the Britons were.

Place-name and other records show that the Britons extended across the island in the centuries prior to and during the Roman occupation. The first recordings of most of these place-names do not date from the Iron Age, however. If anything, they show that the Britons remained in parts of what are now England and Scotland for a longer period than is usually acknowledged. ****

True Brits Introduction: Summary



- ▶ All parts of England were 'Welsh' before they were 'English'
- ▶ English (and Scots) increasingly referred to as 'British'
- ▶ The 'original' British became increasingly referred to as 'Celts'

The story of the Britons is riddled with ironies. For example, if we use the Anglo-Saxons' own name for them, then, by their own admission, there is no part of England that was not 'Welsh' before it was 'English'. Equally ironic is that in recent centuries, since the formation of the united Kingdom of Great Britain, the word 'British' has in many parts of the world become synonymous with 'English'. As a result of this, and in order to avoid confusion between the 'Welsh' Britons of the ancient and medieval periods, and the 'English' (and to a lesser extent 'Scottish') Britons of the modern era, the 'Welsh' Britons became increasingly referred to as 'Celts'.

Although there can be no doubt that the **Brittonic** (P-Celtic) and **Goidelic** (Q-Celtic) languages do share a common origin, the **Celtic** label should not be used anachronistically or in an inappropriate context. There is, for instance, equally little doubt that Common Celtic (not to mention the Romance and Germanic languages) all share a common origin with other **Indo-European** languages, and all of the major peoples who invaded or settled on this island were speakers of an Indo-European language. There is good reason, however, why the early history of Britain does not read like this:

'The first-known historical inhabitants of Britain were Indo-Europeans. In the year 43, their island was conquered by Indo-Europeans from the Mediterranean and added to their Empire. On that empire's collapse in the fifth century, one group of Indo-Europeans moved in from across the North Sea while another did so from across the North Channel. Both of these would go on to establish new kingdoms. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the coastline of Britain was ravaged by Indo-Europeans who would settle in large areas, especially in the east, before the southern part of the island was eventually conquered by an army of Indo-Europeans in 1066.'

Differences should be just as important as similarities, and as such, this module will attempt to put both in their appropriate context. Perhaps the greatest irony, however, is that the subject matter of this module, the 'first' Britons, neither call themselves English today, nor called themselves Celts yesterday.
