

From servants of the Romans to servants of the English. To what extent do these words reflect the story of the Britons in the Early Middle Ages?

In order to consider the relationship between the Romans and the Britons and the English and the Britons it is necessary to investigate the history of the island of Britain across nearly the whole of the first millennium. The written sources for the period are scant and in the absence of an indigenous culture of written record-keeping, this story is often told through the records of immigrant cultures and material sources. In addressing the statement above I have attempted a chronological approach to the source material and the events they describe.

The Romans named the island of Britain *Brittania* at least a century before the Emperor Claudius authorised the arrival of four legions in 43CE, under the pretext of reinstating Verica as king of the Atrebates. Claudius received surrender from eleven British kings from the lowlands, south and east of the Fosse way. Fierce resistance led by Caratacus continued for eight years before he was eventually captured and taken to Rome in 51CE. These events are described by Tacitus, a Roman Senator and historian born in Gaul in 57CE. The only indigenous records of the early history of the Britons are limited to numismatic sources. Tacitus is neither contemporary nor a Briton, but he does refer to earlier historians and his work is the closest thing we have to a contemporary source.

The Roman legions progressed westward slowly. In 60/61 CE Suetonius Paulinus attacked the centre of opposition to Roman rule at Mona (modern day Ynys Môn, the island of Anglesey). Meanwhile, in the east Queen Boudica raised an army of Iceni and Trinovantes against the Romans. With the reported loss of 70,000 to 80,000 lives, this army destroyed Camulodunum (Colchester) and Verulamium (St. Alban's) and burnt the new Roman settlement of Londinium (London) to the ground before Boudica poisoned herself to evade capture after defeat at the Battle of Watling Street.

The Romans built three permanent legionary bases at York (Eboracum), on the eastern edge of the Pennines, Chester (Deva), on the western edge of the pennines and close to the border of modern day Wales, and Caerleon (Isca Silurum) separating Wales from the south west peninsula.

Tacitus claims that the Romans subdued the whole of *Britannia* in 83/84 CE by securing victory over Britons led by Calgacus at the Battle of Mons Graupius in Caledonia. 20,000 Romans led by Gnaeus Julius Agricola and 30,000 Calgacus only appears in Tacitus' account and no-where else, as does the assertion that the lives of thousands of Caledonians were lost but the Romans led by Julius Agricola lost only a few hundred. Agricola returned to Rome and was credited with subduing the last of the British tribes. Agricola was also Tacitus father-in-law.

Fortifications built at Inchtuhil in advance of Agricola's arrival were abandoned only four years after the battle. In 122 CE the Romans started work on Hadrian's Wall. This seventy-nine mile long, fortified, physical barrier that took eight years to construct and was continuously inhabited for three centuries is a strong indicator that for the Romans, Caledonia was always a militarised zone and very different from the Romanised areas in the south-east of the island. The wall bears the scars of being breached and repaired on more than one occasion. The Antonine wall was built between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde dozen years later and was occupied for only twenty years before being abandoned for several decades. Neither was ever the border between two nations. There were no nations. They were built where the distance from coast to coast was shortest and were both surrounded, north and south by Britons.

At the turn of the third century the Emperor Septimius Severus ordered the restoration of the Antonine wall and pushed further into Calendonia, there were no major battles but the Calendonians are reported to have surrendered some of their territory. Severus died in Britain in 211 CE and his son Caracalla, now an Emperor, returned to Rome.

This marks the turning point in the Roman occupation of Britain. The end of expansionist ambitions and the beginning of a period of defence against an increasing range of foes from within the island of Britain and beyond.

In 297CE the Romans first described a threat from the north in the form of the Picts. Britons from the area north of the Antonine wall, they launched raids against the Roman province by land and sea as did raiders from Hibernia (the island of Ireland) including the Scotti who launched raids from and on the west of the province.

The presence of Ogham stones on three Western upland peninsulas of the island carved with inscriptions in Primitive Irish (fourth to sixth centuries) or Old Irish (sixth to tenth centuries) indicates two separate periods of Irish settlement in the Southwest Peninsular of the island of Britain. In the fourth and fifth centuries in East Cornwall and West Devon; and in the sixth century, settlements in West Cornwall. *The Oxford History of Ireland*¹ 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".

More Ogham stones occur in Pembrokeshire than anywhere else beyond outside Ireland. Place names, indicate that both Gaelic and Brittonic languages were spoken here. Dyfed and Brycheiniog were Irish kingdoms and Brecon is named after the Irish prince Brychan.

The third peninsular which bears evidence of Irish settlement is Gwynedd in North Wales. Here the Gaels from Leinster named the Llŷn Peninsular and Porth Dinllaen, both of which are cognate with the 'Lein' of the word Leinster. The significance of the Irish communities in this area was less pronounced than further south, although small numbers of people in the area may have spoken Irish for several centuries.

From the fourth century, Britons were migrating to the American peninsular and the south eastern corner of Brittania was being raided by Germanic tribes, the Franks and the Saxons. The Romans built defensive forts on both sides of the channel and the area between the Wash and the Solent became known as the 'Saxon Shore'.

In 367 Roman Britain came under a concerted and sustained attack from all sides that took a year to bring under control. The Picts took advantage of a rebellion of the garrison at Hadrian's wall and attacked from the North, the Hibernian Scotti attacked the west coast and the Germanic Saxons attacked the east and south coasts. The Barbarian Conspiracy resulted in the destruction of cities, huge loss of life and the taking of many Britons as slaves. Count Theodosius led a force to repel the invasion late in 368 CE but the raids continued long after the Roman legions departed with Constantine III in 407CE.

Bede, writing in the eighth century², describes a desperate plea sent in 440 CE from the Britons to The Roman General Aetius "The barbarians drive us into the sea; the sea throws us back on the

¹ Foster, R.F *The Oxford History of Ireland*, (Oxford:New York : Oxford University Press 1992) p.7

² Bede: *Ecclesiastical History of England* translated by A.M. Sellar (Public Domain) p.29

Barbarians; thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned".³ He relates that Overlord of the Britons, Vortigern, in conjunction with a ruling council, invited Saxon mercenaries to help defend the Britons from attacks by the Picts and the Scotti. The existence of Vortigern's name in Gildas' original text is unconfirmed but two centuries later in an account clearly closely based on Gildas, Bede names 'Vortigern king of the British people'.⁴

In the first quarter of the fifth century the first permanent Anglo-Saxon settlements were established. Angles settled in East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria; Saxons settled in Essex, Sussex and Wessex and Jutes in Kent and the Isle of White. They all spoke the same language, Anglo-Saxon, and are consequently seen as one people. Britons (Anglo-Saxon 'Welsh') still occupied an unbroken stretch of territory between the southwest peninsula (Cornwall) and Strathclyde. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, compiled about four hundred years after the events they describe, list battles won against the Britons, who are referred to in Anglo-Saxon as Welsh. The dates start from the middle of the fifth century and there are no entries for battles won by the Britons. However, Gildas writes that at the turn of the sixth century Britons led by Ambrosius Aurelianus won victory in battle at *Mons Badonicus* and halted the Saxon advance for decades. The *Anglo-Saxon chronicles* list no battles between 527 CE and 552 CE⁵.

Sixth century northern Britain was the most ethnically and linguistically diverse part of the Island. The Picts occupied land North of the Antonine wall, their language was the first to evolve from Brittonic and the first to disappear. The area between the Antonine wall and Hadrian's wall was occupied by Britons, speaking Brittonic. Significant inward migration by Gaelic and Anglo-Saxon speakers meant that four languages, Pictish, Brittonic, Gaelic and English, were in use in Northern Britain.⁶

According to the Irish Annals, The Gaelic speaking Kingdom of Dál Riata was founded by Fergus Mór mac Eirc in Argyll in about 500 AD. This Kingdom comprised lands on both sides of The Straits of Moyle, which separate North Ulster and Argyll by only twelve miles at their narrowest point.

In 574 Áedán mac Gabráin became king of Dál Riata and aggressively expanded the kingdom into northern Britain. In 577 battle of Dyrham (Deorham), near Bath began a series of territorial losses for the Britons, that over five decades resulted in the transfer of control of Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath to the West Saxons. As a result the Britons of southwest peninsular were cut off from the rest of the Britons.

At the beginning of the seventh century, an army of Britons attempted to regain Catraeth from the Angles, they were outnumbered and unsuccessful and there was great loss of life. The event is commemorated in *Y Gododdin* by the early Welsh poet Aneirin⁷.

Aethelfrith may have led the Angles from Bernicia and Deira to victory in this battle against the Men of the North. Aethelfrith did defeat Áedán mac Gabráin in 603 at the Battle of Degsastan (Degsa Stone). In chapter thirty-four of his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* written in the eighth century, Bede asserts that Aethelfrith's forces defeated the army of "Aedan, king of the Scots that

³ Gildas, *On the Ruin of Britain (De Excidio Britanniae)*

⁴ Bede: *Ecclesiastical History of England* translated by A.M. Sellar (Public Domain) p.30

⁵ Gildas, *On the Ruin of Britain (De Excidio Britanniae)*p.32

⁶ Bede: *Ecclesiastical History of England* translated by A.M. Sellar (Public Domain) p.

⁷ Jarman, A.O.H. Aneirin, *Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem* (Llandysul: Gomer 1988)

dwelt in Britain...From that time, no king of the Scots durst come into Britain to make war on the English to this day." He also comments that Aethelfrith

...conquered more territories from the Britons than any other chieftain or king, either subduing the inhabitants or making them tributary, or driving them out and planting the English in their places.⁸

The Battle of Chester in 615 saw the Britons of Powys and Rhos defeated by Aethelfrith and his Northumbrian army and a geographical wedge was placed between territories of the Britons of the western highlands (Wales) and the Britons of the North.

Soon after the battle of Chester, Aethelfrith was killed by an army led by Raedwald of East Anglia. He was succeeded by Edwin whose territorial ambitions were equally expansionist. He invaded the small Brittonic-speaking kingdom of Elmet, absorbing it into Northumbria. He then expanded west and took control of the Isle of Man and Anglesey in 629. Cadwallon king of Gwynedd expelled the invader and in 632 entered an alliance with Penda of Mercia. Edwin was killed at the Battle of Hatfield Chase a year later and for a brief period Cadwallon was overlord of Northumbria which was again split into the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira. He killed both Osric, Edwin's cousin and ruler of Deira and Eanfrith, Aethelfrith's son and the ruler of Bernicia and was himself killed at the Battle of Heavenfield in 634 against a Northumbrian force led by Oswald. Cadwallon was so hated in Northumbria that chroniclers recorded the year of his overlordship as part of Oswald's reign. The death of Cadwallon can be viewed as the end of any opportunity the Britons had to regain control of Britain.

The power of Northumbria was a threat to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia as well as to the Britons of Gwynedd and Powys. Penda formed an alliance with Powys and killed Oswald at the battle of Maserfield in 642. Also in 642CE at the Battle of Strathcarron, the British King Owain of Strathclyde killed the King of Dál Riata Domnall Brecc. Both kingdoms were also under threat from neighbouring Pictish tribes and control of one group over the other was never sustained for long.

The most powerful Mercian king to date, Penda was unexpectedly killed in 655 at the Battle of the Winwaed. Bede described this event as the end of Anglo-Saxon paganism⁹. For him the focus of his enquiry is the spread of Christianity. He was writing in the second quarter of the eighth century about events that occurred almost a hundred years earlier.

The Picts put a permanent end to Northumbrian expansion north of the Forth in 685 when Bidei led them to a decisive victory at Dunnichen (Nechtansmere).

The Britons defeated the Picts at Mugdock near Strathblane in 750 and ensured the survival of Strathclyde until the eleventh century.

The first recorded Viking raid on Anglo-Saxon territory occurred in 793 when the Monastery on the island of Lindisfarne was raided. The Vikings, also referred to as Danes or Norsemen spoke the North Germanic, Old Norse language. Like the Anglo-Saxons before them they originated from different places but shared a language. As a rule, there were no allegiances between different groups, but alliances were made when circumstances required it.

In 834 a combined force of Scots and Picts was defeated by Vikings at Fortriu but continued co-operation between them led to the formation of the kingdom of Alba in about 900.

⁸ Bede *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*

⁹ Bede *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*

After decades of Viking raids, a combined force of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes landed in 865 intent on conquest. In six years, they conquered East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia. In 878 they attacked the last independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Wessex, and were defeated by Alfred the Great at the Battle of Edington. Alfred made concessions to the Norsemen who controlled large chunks of Northumbria and Mercia and the whole of Essex and East Anglia. He initiated the Danelaw, an area occupied by both Anglo-Saxons and Vikings within which Danish law would have precedence over Anglo-Saxon Law. Most of the territory under Danelaw was recaptured by Anglo-Saxons.

Alfred called himself king of the Angles and the Saxons. In 927 his grandson Athelstan conquered Northumbria and became king of all the Anglo-Saxon territories, the first King of England. He received pledges of allegiance from the remaining kings of the Britons, Hywel Da of Wales and Owain of Strathclyde and Constantine II, King of Scots.

The Romans were met with fierce resistance on their arrival and the Roman Province of Britannia never included the whole of Britain. The evidence of Romanisation is limited to lowland areas of the island of Britain. The higher more mountainous regions of the Southwest, West and North were at best held in abeyance by a military presence. The Romans only occupied about half the landmass of the island of Britain, but they kept written records and in them laid claim to the whole of Britannia.

The first Saxon raids were carried out before the Romans withdrew at the beginning of the fifth century. It was five hundred years before there was a King of England and like the Romans before them the Anglo-Saxons were for the most part restricted to the lowland areas of the island. Most of the Britons were never servants of the Romans or the English.

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