

German Bite: The Saxon Conquest of Britain



...nothing was
ever so
pernicious to
our country,
nothing was
ever so unlucky
(Gildas).

At some point in the second quarter of the fifth century, various Germanic tribes, usually collectively referred to as Anglo-Saxons, arrived in Britain for the first time as permanent settlers rather than raiders. All of the land they would eventually claim had been inhabited prior to their arrival by Britons, and, at its maximum, extended from the Channel to the Firth of Forth.

No contemporary accounts exist from fifth century Britain, although the British cleric Gildas wrote his *De Excidio Britanniae* in the sixth, while the process was still ongoing. He is therefore the closest source to the initial events. Other sources from the early medieval period include Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, written in the eighth century, the early ninth century *Historia Brittonum* usually accredited to Nennius, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, started later in the ninth century, and the tenth century *Annales Cambriae*. All of these were written in Latin except for the *Chronicles*, which are almost entirely in Old English, or as it is sometimes called, Anglo-Saxon. Any "quotes" below from these works are taken from modern English translations. The *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* were written from the Britons' point of view, with the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* and the *Chronicles* taking the English point of view. Bias can be assumed in all of them.

Gildas, although a Briton himself, seems to be universally critical of everyone (except the Romans), albeit with undertones of regret from the Brittonic perspective. In his preface, for example, he refers to his fellow countrymen as "an indolent and slothful race" whose fate was brought upon them by their ungodly behaviour. Given Gildas' calling, this may well have been the most important issue for him anyway. Later authors use Gildas as a source, and often follow or modify his descriptions.

Image: The first Germanic "keels", led by the brothers Hengist (also written Hengest) and Horsa, land in Britain. From John Haaren's *Famous Men of the Middle Ages* (1904).

Vortigern and the Saxon Uprising



- ▶ Picts and Scots raid Britain regularly
- ▶ 'Groans of the Britons' unheeded
- ▶ Vortigern employs Saxon mercenaries
- ▶ These have ideas of their own

The “Groans of the Britons” first alluded to by Gildas, referred to attacks on the former province of Britannia by Picts and Scots. Around the middle of the fifth century, probably in the 440s, the Britons sent a message to Aetius, a Roman general, asking for military assistance and claiming that:

“The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians; thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned”.

The Western Roman Empire was in decline throughout the fifth century, and it's unlikely that the Romans would have been in a position to send aid even if they had wanted to, given Honorius' letter of 410 telling them to look to their own defences. In an attempt to do just that, Vortigern the “legendary” (i.e. his existence has been disputed) Overlord of the Britons, acting in conjunction with a ruling Council, is said to have looked to the Saxons, themselves raiders of the island, to play a kind of poacher-turned-gamekeeper role, and defend the Britons from the aggression of the Picts and Scots. The Saxons were therefore “invited” in as mercenaries, a practice not uncommon in former Roman provinces. This was deemed, by Gildas (and many others since) to be an act of great folly, which sealed the Britons' doom:

“Those very people whom, ...they dreaded more than death itself, were invited to reside....under the selfsame roof”.

At the time, however, the Saxons may simply have been seen as the lesser of two evils.

Image: An engraving of Hengist and Horsa, the two brothers who led the uprising against Vortigern, from Sir Edward Parrott's *The Pageant of British History* (1909).

Vortigern and the Saxon Uprising



- ▶ Saxons rise up against Vortigern
- ▶ Reinforcements sent for from homelands
- ▶ Gildas' 'fire and brimstone' account
- ▶ The spread 'from sea to sea' is likely exaggerated

Gildas then continues with the classic account of the advent of the Saxons. They came in three keels, and landed on the eastern side of the island on Vortigern's invitation, supposedly to defend the Britons' land but with the actual intention of taking it from them. Following the initial group, the Saxons sent for a larger force. Having initially agreed on land and provisions, the Saxons then complain that these are insufficient because their numbers have grown, and unless they are given more they will break the treaty and overrun the island.

Gildas then goes on to note that:

"In a short time, they follow up their threats with deeds. For the fire of vengeance, justly kindled by former crimes, spread from sea to sea".

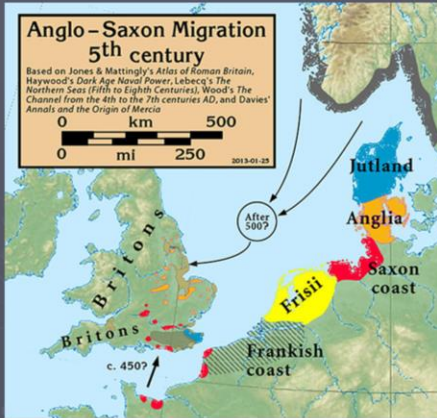
This process continued until:

"destroying the neighbouring towns and lands, it reached the other side of the island, and dipped its red and savage tongue in the western ocean."

Gildas' work is full of "fire and brimstone" descriptions such as these, many of which are probably grossly exaggerated for dramatic effect. At the time of writing, for example, it is highly unlikely that the Saxons had reached the "western ocean" as they did not capture Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester until the Battle of Dyrham in 577, almost certainly after Gildas' death.

Image: The Red Dragon (representing the Britons) and the White Dragon (representing the Saxons), do battle in Vortigern's presence. The Red Dragon was victorious. No Briton at the time would have imagined otherwise. Based on the story from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the original is kept at Lambeth Palace library.

Anglo-Saxon Migrations



- Settlements of Angles, Saxons and Jutes
- Angles in East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria
- Saxons in Essex, Sussex and Wessex
- Jutes in Kent and the Isle of Wight

Dates for the arrival of the first mercenary Saxons, under the leadership of Hengist and Horsa, vary from Nennius' 428 to Bede's 449, and should therefore, along with other dates for this period, be seen as approximate rather than definite. Bede's account lists the various Germanic peoples involved, and the areas they would eventually come to occupy. Although Gildas does not specify a year, it is clear that other aspects of his account, such as the arrival in three keels and the ravaging of the island from sea to sea, were later copied by Bede. The second half of the fifth century then saw a series of conflicts between the Saxons and the Britons, as recorded against the following years in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*:

455: Hengest and Horsa fought Vortigern the king, in the place called Aegelsthrep. His brother Horsa was killed, and after that Hengest and his son Aesc received the kingdom.

456: Hengest and Aesc fought the Britons in the place called Crecganford. There they killed four companies. The Britons gave up Kent, and in great fear fled to London.

465: Hengest and Aesc fought the Welsh near Wippedesfleot and killed twelve Welsh ealdormen. One of their own thanes was killed there, whose name was Wipped.

473: Hengest and Aesc fought the Welsh and seized countless spoils of war. The Welsh fled the English as one flees fire.

And so it goes on. It should be remembered that these accounts were written a good four hundred years after the supposed events, and not without some bias. Given their content it is not surprising that later historians give the accounts that they do. There is little mention of battles lost to the Britons, or, as we can now clearly see them also being labelled, the Welsh. However battles lost to Britons there certainly were, including perhaps the best known, the battle of Mons Badonicus or Badon Hill.

Image: Anglo-Saxon Migration in the 5th century (courtesy of notuncurious).

A hero to the rescue?



- ▶ The Battle of Badon (Mons Badonicus)
- ▶ Halts Saxon expansion for a generation
- ▶ No recorded battles between 527 and 552
- ▶ Led by Ambrosius (Emrys)...or Arthur?
- ▶ Arthur first mentioned in *Historia Brittonum*

Mons Badonicus took place at around the turn of the sixth century. Gildas claims that it in fact took place in the year of his birth. This battle, led, according to Gildas, by Ambrosius Aurelianus, is deemed to have halted the Saxon advance for decades. Indeed, the *Chronicles* themselves make no mention of any battles between the Britons and the Saxons for the quarter of a century between 527 and 552. Given their apparent eagerness to note any victories on their part, it's a fairly safe bet that had there been any they would have been mentioned.

The *Historia Brittonum* tells a rather different tale of these initial battles between Saxon and Briton. Like Gildas, it too mentions both Ambrosius and the battle of Mons Badonicus, but in a rather different sequence of events. Ambrosius is here recorded as an almost magical figure, who tells Vortigern of conflict between a red dragon representing the Britons, and a white dragon representing the Saxons, with the red dragon ultimately victorious. This event is said to have taken place at Dinas Emrys, (the Fortress of Ambrosius) in the mountains of Snowdonia. Ambrosius' character, albeit merged with that of Myrddin Wyllt, then goes on, by the high medieval period, to morph into the wizard Merlin.

The actual battles themselves, culminating in the one at Mons Badonicus, were led in this account, not by Ambrosius, but by a certain Arthur:

"Then it was that the magnanimous Arthur with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror".

Image: Defeat of the Saxons by Arthur from John Cassell's *Illustrated History of England* (1857).

A hero to the rescue?



- ▶ Britons still in control of most of Britain in the sixth century
- ▶ Occupying unbroken territory from Cornwall to Strathclyde
- ▶ Anglo-Saxons confined to the south and east

The locations of these twelve battles are then named, with particular mention being made of the eighth, at: *“Gurnion castle, where Arthur bore the image of the Holy Virgin, mother of God upon his shoulders, and through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the holy Mary, put the Saxons to flight, and pursued them the whole day with great slaughter”*

and of course the final twelfth battle, which was:

“a most severe contest, when Arthur penetrated to the hill of Badon. In this engagement, nine hundred and forty fell by his hand alone, no one but the Lord affording him assistance. In all these engagements the Britons were successful. For no strength can avail against the will of the Almighty”.

Gildas makes no mention of Arthur, and it's likely, especially given the superhuman nature of some of his supposed feats, that he is a legendary, rather than historical character. However, legendary or not, Arthur, like Merlin, was a Briton. Later debates as to whether he was Welsh, Cornish, Breton, or one of the “Men of the North” and so on are superfluous, as at the time in question, no such distinction existed. He therefore belongs equally to them all. One thing, however, is certain, he was in no way “king of England”, a rather deceptive role-reversing label which grew in popularity in medieval England almost a thousand years after Arthur's supposed era following the publication of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The truth as to what actually happened in these early skirmishes is likely to lie somewhere between the versions recorded in both the *Historia Brittonum* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.

A century after the Saxons' arrival, at the time of Gildas' writing, the Britons were still in possession of the bulk of their land, and the earliest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, including Lindsey, East Anglia, Essex, Kent and Sussex, were established along the eastern and southern coasts behind the Fosse Way.

Image: From Grant Allen's *Anglo-Saxon Britain* showing the “Welsh” still in control of most of Britain in the year 500. (The inclusion of the north-eastern Bernicia and Deira at this time is premature. There were no Anglian kings in this region until 547, so the map is actually more like the year 550 than 500).

The battle of Dyrham 577



- ▶ Saxons took Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester
- ▶ Formed a wedge between the Britons of the south west peninsula and the rest of the country

Had the incomers' advance stopped at this point in the Lowland Zone, the future of the island of Britain, and the Britons themselves, would no doubt have looked very different. However, it was the expansion of three other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, namely Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, which would deal the most damaging blow to the Britons' future. Some of the smaller and earlier Germanic kingdoms, such as Lindsey, would also lose their independence to these larger three.

After a possible cessation of hostilities around the second and third quarters of the sixth century following Mons Badonicus, things were about to hot up again in the final quarter. The battle of Dyrham (or Deorham) in 577 was the start of a disastrous half-century or so for the Britons, by the end of which the eventual outcome of the wars between the two sets of belligerents would become clearer. Here, the Britons lost control of Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester to the increasingly powerful West Saxons. In addition to the value of these three cities in their own right, their geographical location between the Rivers Avon and Severn effectively cut off the Britons of the south west peninsula from their fellow countrymen, although links by sea were still maintained. Up until this point, the Britons had been in control of an unbroken stretch of territory in the western half of Britain, from Strathclyde in the north to Cornwall in the south.

Image: Dyrham Camp Hillfort, likely location of the battle.

The Battle of Catraeth c. 600



- ▶ Angles take Catraeth (probably Catterick)
- ▶ Britons send force of 300 to reclaim it
- ▶ British force is too small and is wiped out
- ▶ Commemorated in early Welsh poem – *Y Gododdin*

A generation after Dyrham, attention moves from the South West to the North East. Catraeth is more than likely modern day Catterick in Yorkshire, home to a former Roman fort. At the time in question this fort had fallen into the hands of the Angles. Consequently, the Gododdin, a Brittonic tribe known as the Votadini in Roman times, led an assault from their capital at Edinburgh in an attempt to halt Anglo-Saxon expansion. The expedition was a disaster for the Britons in which nearly all of them lost their lives. Their bravery against a much larger force, however, has been preserved in the poem entitled *Y Gododdin*, credited to Aneirin, one of the earliest “Welsh” poets, and himself a reputed participant in the battle. Below is the first verse, which, apart from noting the tragedy of the event, may also give some indication of the enormous differences between the Welsh and English languages:

*Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth oedd ffraeth eu llu,
Glasfedd eu hancwyn a gwenwyn fu,
Trychant trwy beiriant yn catáu,
A gwedi elwch tawelwch fu.
Cyd elwynt lannau i benydu,
Dadl ddiau angau i eu treiddu.*

Men went to Catraeth, swift was their host,
Fresh mead was their feast and it was poison,
Three hundred fighting according to plan,
And after jubilation there was silence.
Though they went to churches to do penance,
The inescapable meeting with death came to them.

Anglian territory north of the Humber was initially split into two early coastal kingdoms, Deira, from the Humber to the Tees, and Bernicia, from the Tees to the Forth. These were united by force at the beginning of the seventh century by the Bernician king Aethelfrith, who subsequently laid the foundations for the merged kingdom of Northumbria. The Battle of Catraeth was fought between Britons from various parts of northern Britain, and Angles from both Bernicia and Deira who may well have been led by Aethelfrith.

Image: Approximate distribution of Angles, Saxons and Jutes in about 600 (courtesy of Hel-hama).

The Battle of Chester 615



- ▶ Northumbria versus Powys and Rhos
- ▶ Northumbrians slaughter monks from Bangor on Dee
- ▶ Their victory cuts off 'Wales' from the 'Old North'

It was definitely Aethelfrith who led the Northumbrian forces in the west of Britain in the following decade. Before the battle started, Aethelfrith ordered the massacre of hundreds of British monks from the nearby monastery at Bangor on Dee. According to Bede, this was because although they bore no arms, they were nevertheless praying for a Northumbrian defeat. As it in fact resulted in a Northumbrian victory, Aethelfrith no doubt felt his actions were justified.

The battle itself took place between the Northumbrians on the one hand, and the Britons of the Kingdom of Powys and the sub-kingdom of Rhos on the other. The leaders of both British kingdoms were killed, and following the separation of Wales from the South West peninsula at the Battle of Dyrham, the Battle of Chester caused a similar wedge by land between the Britons of Wales and the Men of the North, although once again, links by sea were still possible.

Bede noted of Aethelfrith that he:

“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”.

Shortly after the Battle of Chester, Aethelfrith himself was killed by an army led by Raedwald of East Anglia, a clear sign that not all battles in this period took place between one ethnic group and another. Many power struggles involved Angle against Angle, Briton against Briton, or combinations of both. An excellent example of this can be seen in the alliance formed in the second quarter of the seventh century between Cadwallon ap Cadfan of Gwynedd and Penda of Mercia.

Image: The Massacre of the Clergy of Bangor by the Troops of Ethelfrid from *The History of England* by George Courtney Lyttleton, 1805.

My enemy's enemy is my friend: Cadwallon and Penda



- ▶ Edwin succeeds Aethelfrith to throne of Northumbria
- ▶ Edwin invades Anglesey
- ▶ Cadwallon of Gwynedd ejects him
- ▶ Enters into alliance with Penda of Mercia

During Aethelfrith's reign, Raedwald of East Anglia was one of several rulers who had offered shelter to Edwin, Aethelfrith's main rival to the Northumbrian throne. Following Aethelfrith's death by Raedwald's forces, Edwin was now able to claim Northumbria for himself.

Prior to this, in the first decade of the seventh century, Edwin is believed to have been fostered by king Cadfan ap Iago of Gwynedd, alongside Cadwallon, Cadfan's own son. A decade later, Edwin was afforded protection by king Cearl of Mercia, whose daughter, Cwenburg, he later married. How strange then, if not also very typical of the time, that Edwin would become a major threat to two kingdoms which had previously protected him, and that he would ultimately be killed by forces led by his 'foster-brother' Cadwallon.

Edwin's ambitions to extend his kingdom had become apparent early in his reign. He invaded the small Brittonic-speaking kingdom of Elmet, located in the western part of what would become Yorkshire, and ejected its king Cerdic. He then incorporated Elmet into Northumbria in 627, by which time Cadwallon had succeeded his father as king of Gwynedd. From here, Edwin pushed further west to the Irish Sea, and took control of the Isle of Man and Anglesey in 629, besieging Cadwallon on the nearby Puffin Island in the process. Angered by these events, Cadwallon drove the Northumbrians from his lands before entering into, and leading, an alliance with Penda of Mercia in 632. Things came to a head the following year at the Battle of Hatfield Chase, where Edwin and one of his sons, Osfrith, were both killed. In the wake of Hatfield, Cadwallon went on to briefly become overlord of a newly-divided Northumbria, split once again into Deira, ruled by Edwin's cousin Osric, and Bernicia, ruled by Eanfrith, the son of Edwin's rival and predecessor, Aethelfrith.

Image: A 15th century illustration of Cadwallon from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Held at the National Library of Wales (Peniarth MS 23C)

My enemy's enemy is my friend: Cadwallon and Penda



- ▶ Cadwallon overlord of Northumbria briefly
- ▶ Cadwallon is killed in Battle of Heavenfield in 634
- ▶ Penda enters another alliance with the Welsh
- ▶ This time with Powys instead of Gwynedd
- ▶ Penda is killed in Battle of Winwaed in 655

Cadwallon unsurprisingly became a hated figure in Northumbria during this period, with Bede even suggesting that he was determined to exterminate the English race from Britain. Given his alliance with Penda, this was no doubt an exaggeration. However, both Osric and Eanfrith were killed by Cadwallon, who was himself killed at the Battle of Heavensfield in 634, against a Northumbrian force led by Oswald, son of Aethelfrith and brother of Eanfrith. Cadwallon's death has been seen in retrospect as the last chance for the Britons to regain overall control of Britain, with Northumbrian chroniclers finding Osric and Eanfrith's year under Cadwallon's overlordship so abhorrent that it was added to the period of Oswald's reign.

Oswald himself ruled Northumbria for eight years before being killed and dismembered at the Battle of Maserfield in 642 fighting against a force led by, of all people, Penda of Mercia. Penda was once again in alliance with the Welsh, the main differences on this occasion being that Penda was the stronger partner, and that the Welsh were those of the kingdom of Powys rather than Gwynedd. The most powerful king that Mercia had seen up until that point, he was unexpectedly killed at the Battle of the Winwaed by Oswiu of Bernicia, brother of Oswald and son of Aethelfrith.

The "moral" of these relationships would seem to be that what goes around comes around. Gwynedd, Powys and Mercia would all have had cause to be wary of the growing power of Northumbria during this period, and to act together where necessary as a consequence. How ironic, then, that some century and a half after their collaboration, Mercia would set about constructing a permanent physical barrier, not between itself and Northumbria, but between itself and the Welsh.

Image: The stained glass window in Worcester Cathedral showing the death of Penda in 655 (courtesy of Swicher).

The Venerable Bede: A view of Britain from the 730s



- At first, this island had no other inhabitants than the Britons
- Now it has four nations, each with a language of their own, but all united by Latin and the Scriptures

It can now be seen that the creation of Anglo-Saxon England from the greater part of Britannia took not a few years or decades, but a few centuries. The process started in the fifth century, was still ongoing in Gildas' time in the sixth century and still not complete when Bede was writing in the eighth. Bede's work therefore offers an opportunity to look at the state of affairs some two hundred years after Gildas, and some three hundred after the first arrival of the Anglo-Saxons.

Of the peoples and languages of Britain at the time, Bede notes that:

"There are in the island at present...five languages of different nations...to wit, English, British, Scottish, Pictish and Latin, the last having become common to all by the study of the Scriptures. But at first, this island had no other inhabitants than the Britons, from whom it derived its name".

It's worth noting that Bede here makes no linguistic distinction between Angles, Saxons and Jutes, all of whom speak English, nor between the Britons of Wales, Cornwall, Strathclyde etc, all of whom speak British. He continues with a rather fanciful story of how the Picts arrived by sea from the east and landed in Ireland, only to be told that they could not stay there, but should occupy the northernmost part of Britain.

Following the arrival of the Picts:

"In process of time, Britain received a third nation, the Scots, who, migrating from Ireland...secured to themselves those settlements among the Picts which they still possess".

Image: The Anglo-Saxon 'Heptarchy' (i.e. seven kingdoms) with the different kingdoms shown in red. These varied in influence in different periods prior to the foundation of a united England.

The Venerable Bede: A view of Britain from the 730s



- ▶ The Pictish people are at peace with the English nation
- ▶ The Scots....devise no plots nor hostilities against the English nation
- ▶ The Britons....for the most part....hate and oppose the English nation

The fourth, and, at that time, final nation to settle in Britain were the English, who arrived initially, according to Bede, some 285 years before the time of writing.

On relations between the English and the other three, he notes the following against each one:

“The Pictish people also at this time are at peace with the English nation, and rejoice in having their part in Catholic peace and truth with the universal Church.”

In similar fashion:

“The Scots that inhabit Britain, devise no plots nor hostilities against the English nation.”

Whereas, on the other hand:

“The Britons....for the most part, as a nation hate and oppose the English nation....for though in part they are their own masters, yet part of them are brought under subjection to the English.”

It would seem then that Penda's alliances with the Welsh in the previous century were the exception rather than the rule, possibly due to Penda himself being of Brittonic descent. By Bede's time it was business as usual again, and nothing would illustrate this more clearly than the construction, towards the end of the eighth century, of the longest barrier in Britain, a barrier between the English and the Welsh.

Image: The Venerable Bede writing his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People) held at Engelberg Abbey, Switzerland.

The construction of Offa's Dyke



- ▶ Earthwork covering 82 miles of a 149 mile border
- ▶ Constructed between c. 784-796
- ▶ Marks western boundary of Mercia
- ▶ No similar works denote Mercia's other borders

Offa's Dyke is an earthwork covering 82 of the 149 miles from Chepstow on the south Wales coast to Prestatyn on the north Wales coast. The constructed parts by themselves occupy a longer length than the whole of Hadrian's Wall. The Dyke does not represent an unbroken border, as natural features such as rivers and gorges fulfil this function along some of its length.

The traditionally accepted story is that construction was ordered by King Offa of Mercia and carried out in the last twelve years or so of his reign between about 784 and 796. Some scholars dispute this, arguing that work began some three hundred years earlier, although what function it would have served in that period is uncertain. It was certainly credited to Offa as long ago as the ninth century when the Welsh monk Asser wrote that *"there was in Mercia in fairly recent time a certain vigorous king called Offa, who terrified all the neighbouring kings and provinces around him, and who had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea"*. (Life of Alfred, p. 14)

Today, Offa's Dyke is popularly thought of as an early border between England and Wales. It certainly was not this, as even at this late point, there was still no unified kingdom of either England or Wales. It can perhaps be thought of as a border between "the English" (people) and "the Welsh", as although it was erected by the Anglian kingdom of Mercia, there are no equivalent boundaries between Mercia and, say, Wessex or Northumbria. The Dyke does not follow the current border precisely but is fairly close to it, although Wat's Dyke is closer to the modern boundary in the north east.

Image: Offa's Dyke (in red) shown against the boundaries of eight century Mercia (in black). Image courtesy of Rushton 2010.

Split Brits



Britons separated into three isolated areas:

- ▶ "The Old North" Strathclyde/Cumbria
- ▶ "North Wales" i.e. Wales/Cymru
- ▶ "West Wales" i.e. Cornwall/Kernow
- ▶ The Brittonic language would also diverge over time

The above image comes from *A literary & historical atlas of Europe* (1914), by Bartholomew, J. G.

The map clearly shows the Britons split into three areas separated by the three largest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Offa's Dyke is clearly visible as the border between "North Wales" (modern-day Wales) and Mercia. What had been the Britons' "Old North" (*Yr Hen Ogledd*) is now restricted to "Strathclyde", separated from Wales (*Cymru*) by Northumbria. Wessex separates *Cymru* from Cornwall (*Kernow*), shown here as "West Wales". A situation similar to this would have been possible in the early ninth century, just before the influence of the Vikings began to take hold. It gives a good indication of the amount of territory that the Britons had lost in the 350 years or so since the advent of the Anglo-Saxons, and may go some way towards explaining why Bede felt that they "hate and oppose the English nation".

As a result of this geographical separation the Brittonic language also gradually diverged over time. The languages that we now know (in English) as Welsh and Cornish are the end result of this process. There is a possibility that the language of the Old North may likewise have developed into a separate "Cumbric" language had it survived long enough, although the differences between Welsh and Cumbric are more geographical than linguistic. The oldest "Welsh" literature actually originates from what is now northern England and southern Scotland, and during the time in question the languages of all three of these areas would still have been mutually intelligible to a large extent.

The Viking Threat



- Coastal raids for some half a century
- Combined army of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes in 865
- Conquered all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms bar Wessex
- Defeated by Alfred the Great in 878

The earliest recorded raid by the Vikings on Anglo-Saxon territory took place in 793, when they raided the monastery on the island of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria. Monasteries were seen as easy targets full of riches, and the following year they attempted a similar raid on another one at Jarrow. Here they bit off more than they could chew, being initially fought off by the monks and then killed outside by local people. Nevertheless, in the main the Vikings would prove to be a thorn in the side of the Anglo-Saxons for the best part of 250 years.

In much the same way as the Anglo-Saxons are also variously called Angles, Saxons, or English, so the Vikings were also known as Danes, Northmen or Norsemen. Although there are minor differences between, say, Danish or Norwegian Vikings, they can basically be thought of as one people at the time. Speakers of the North Germanic (Scandinavian) language of Old Norse, there was no “special relationship” between them and the West Germanic Anglo-Saxons any more than there was between the Gaelic and Brittonic speaking “Celts” of early medieval Britain.

By the middle of the ninth century, the kingdoms of Sussex, Kent and Essex had become vassal states of Wessex, and only Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria remained independent. Just as the Saxons had raided the coast of Britain for decades before attempting to invade, the Vikings did likewise. In 865, a “Great Heathen Army” of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes landed with conquest in mind. They took York in 866, and by 871 had conquered Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia. In 878, they came up against Alfred the Great of Wessex, who defeated them in the Battle of Edington. This would ultimately lead to the establishment of the Danelaw.

Image: Route and battles of the Great Heathen Army (courtesy of Hel-hama).

The Danelaw



- ▶ Alfred secured independence for his lands
- ▶ Danelaw covered roughly half of what would become England
- ▶ Gradually reconquered, it effectively ceased to exist in 954

Although victorious, what Alfred had actually done was repel the Danes from his own expanded kingdom of Wessex, and ensure its continued independence. The Norsemen were still in control of all of Essex and East Anglia, and large chunks of Mercia and Northumbria. To maintain stability, Alfred agreed a treaty with Guthrum, his opponent. One of the conditions was that Guthrum be baptised a Christian. This was followed by the establishment of the Danelaw.

Within the boundaries of the Danelaw, Danish law took precedence over the laws of the Anglo-Saxons, although there were plenty of these living within its boundaries. There were also Danes living inside Anglo-Saxon lands. The Danelaw was gradually reconquered by Anglo-Saxons but some parts survived until 954. The Scandinavian influence, though, would be felt long after this, and left its mark on the English language, especially in Yorkshire and the East Midlands (old Danish Mercia). Place-names in *-thorpe*, *-thwaite* and *-by* are all Norse. Just as Gildas had done with the Saxons, Alfred saw the Vikings as a punishment from God. They also made their presence felt in Scotland, Ireland and France, with consequences that would again be felt in a kingdom soon about to be called England for the first time. The end of the Danelaw did not mark the end of the Viking era.

As for the Welsh, whether of the Cambrian or Cornish variety, they would be much less disturbed by the Vikings, and were not above joining forces with the Norsemen against the English if in their interest to do so. There are a few Norse place-names around the coast of Wales, such as the islands of Skomer and Skokholm, as well as Ongl's island (Anglesey) and Sven's island (Swansea) – named after Sven Forkbeard, but in the main, their kingdoms held firm. Ironically, as a common enemy the Vikings helped unite the Picts and Scots when forming a unified kingdom of Scotland, and did likewise with the Anglo-Saxon territories to form a unified kingdom of England.

Image: The Danelaw (lighter yellow) in the ninth century, from the *Atlas of European History*, by Earle W Dowe, G Bell and Sons, London, 1910.

Founding a unified England



- ▶ Athelstan becomes first king of all England in 927
- ▶ Ethelred's long reign disturbed by conflict with Danes
- ▶ Danes, including Knut the Great, rule England between 1016 and 1042

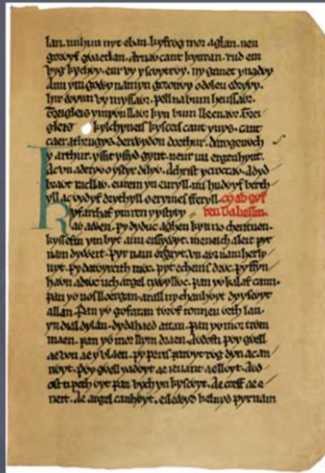
Alfred the Great used the title “King of the Angles and Saxons” between about 886 and his death in 899. However, because of the Danelaw, Alfred never ruled over all of England. The first person to do that would be his grandson Athelstan, who conquered Northumbria in 927, and became king of all the Anglo-Saxon territories (i.e. the old Heptarchy) as a result. He is thus regarded as the first King of England, an entity which, from the advent of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century, took some 500 years to form.

In addition to being the direct ruler of England, he received pledges of allegiance from the Welsh King Hywel Dda, the King of Scots, Constantine II, and Owain, King of Strathclyde. This basically meant that they would rule their own countries internally but swear to make no acts of aggression against Athelstan. This was clearly seen by him as a one-way relationship as, in 934, he invaded Scotland, although he subsequently retreated. Athelstan clearly had pretensions to being overlord of all Britain and did rule over an orderly kingdom in England, but things started to unravel after his death in 939.

None of the following five kings lived to be more than 32 years of age, and by the turn of the millennium, the long rule of Ethelred the Unready (which meant *ill-advised* not *unprepared*) would be plagued by fresh conflict with the Danes. Ethelred abandoned his throne to Sven Forkbeard, who became the first Danish King of England in 1013. Sven was followed by his son Knut (the Great), but Ethelred returned to drive him out. Knut retook the throne after Ethelred's death and ruled England for nineteen years, as well as Denmark for seventeen and Norway for seven! In all, the House of Denmark ruled England uninterrupted from 1016 – 1042.

Image: Stained glass window of Athelstan in All Souls College Chapel, Oxford.

Armes Prydein



- ▶ Written in Welsh in the tenth century
- ▶ Foresees an alliance to expel the English
- ▶ Includes Britons, Gaels and Vikings
- ▶ Anger at policies of Hywel Dda

A unified England was not met with joy on all sides. *Armes Prydein* (The Prophecy of Britain) is a poem written in Welsh in the early tenth century which foresees a future where the Britons, aided by the Gaels and the Vikings, would expel the English from the island of Britain forever. In all respects, however, any realistic prospect of such an event taking place had long since passed, and the idea of an alliance with the Gaels and the Vikings, regular enemies of the Welsh, was very unusual, and another case of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”.

The piece below from an English translation gives a flavour of the tone:

“The warriors will scatter the foreigners as far as Caithness — They will rejoice after the devastation, And there will be reconciliation between the Welsh and the men of Dublin, The Irish of Ireland and Man and Scotland,

The men of Cornwall and of Strathclyde will be made welcome amongst us, The Britons will rise again when they prevail”

The translation was provided by Andrew Breeze and can be seen here:

<http://exploringcelticciv.web.unc.edu/prsp-record/text-armed-prydein/>

The “foreigners” referred to are the English, and the “men of Dublin” are not Irish, but Vikings. The piece is usually dated to around the time of Athelstan’s death, and is held, amongst other things, to be an expression of anger at the subservient attitude of Hywel Dda towards the likes of Athelstan, and Hywel’s stance of “neutrality” at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937, where he stood aside rather than opposing Athelstan and supporting his fellow Britons of the Kingdom of Strathclyde.

Image: A page from the 14th century *Book of Taliesin*, which contains a version of *Armes Prydein*

The Norman Conquest of England



- ▶ Vikings given land in France by treaty
- ▶ Duchy of Normandy created in tenth century
- ▶ William claims the throne of England
- ▶ England and its language changed forever

The Vikings went much further afield than Britain and Ireland. Another of their regular destinations was France, where they would sail up the River Seine towards Paris. Eventually, to get rid of them, the Frankish King Charles III gave territory to their leader Rollo in 911, and so was created the Duchy of Normandy, Normandy meaning roughly “land of the Norsemen”. These Norsemen eventually took up French ways, including their own dialect of the French language.

In 1066, William, Duke of Normandy, a claimant to the English throne, defeated Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings to take his prize. This saw the beginning of the Norman conquest of England, although it was the ruling elite, rather than the bulk of the population, which changed.

The Norman Conquest had implications for all parts of Britain and Ireland, but most directly for England. Wales, due to its numerous rulers and awkward geography, took much longer to fully conquer and did not feel the same effects. The Norman kings of England were largely “absentee landlords”, with the majority born and spending most of their time in France, unable to speak English. The English language subsequently saw enormous permanent changes during this period, with tens of thousands of words, perhaps as much as a third of its total vocabulary, today the result of borrowings from French. In many respects, pre-Norman and post-Norman England were two very different countries, and the conquest meant that the Anglo-Saxon era was now over.

Image: A section of the Bayeux Tapestry showing the fall of Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings