

Putting the Great into Great Britain: The Founding of Brittany



- Migration Period across Europe
- No coincidence that Britain and Brittany are so similar
- Brittonic migration to Armorica and Galicia
- To *Bretagne* from *Grande Bretagne*

At the same time as the Gaels were heading into Britain from the west, and the Anglo-Saxons were doing likewise from the east, so the Britons were themselves heading south. Traditional accounts usually refer to ‘conquering’ Saxons and ‘fleeing’ Britons. In other words, the Britons (or some of them at least) were deemed to be ‘running away’ while the Saxons were ‘invading’.

However, this process should be seen as part of the Migration Period which saw movements of people across Europe between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Viking Era. Indeed, some (but not all) argue that these migrations were responsible for the Empire’s collapse. Germanic peoples, for example, moved in to not just Britain, but many other areas that were under Roman control. The Franks moved in to Gaul and turned most of it into the ‘land of the Franks’ (to become France in due course) while the Lombards moved in to northern Italy to establish Lombardy, and so on. However, these Germanic peoples had themselves been pushed westwards by the Slavs, and more particularly, the Huns, who caused many of them to ‘flee’ to lands within the Empire. Few historical accounts, however, note that the Britons were conquering Armorica while the Saxons were fleeing from the Huns!

It is no coincidence that the names Britain and Brittany are so similar. Part of the Migration Period witnessed Britons moving into Armorica, a peninsula in the north west of Gaul, and turning it into Brittany, ‘land of the Britons’. As there were also still Britons in Britain, a distinction had to be made between the smaller colony and its parent land, and so, in French to this day (with equivalents in Italian, Spanish and various other languages) ‘*Bretagne*’ refers to Brittany (little Britain), while ‘*Grande Bretagne*’ (big Britain) is used to describe the land from whence they came. It is therefore the migration to Brittany, and not the much more recent ‘British’ Empire, which is responsible for putting the Great into Great Britain. A smaller migration took place from Britain to ‘Britonia’, in modern day Galicia.

Image: Migration routes of Britons to Armorica and Galicia

The legend of Conan Meriadoc, 'founder' of Brittany



- Migration begins in late fourth century
- Conan: first ruler and 'founder' of Brittany
- Armorica 'given' to him by Magnus Maximus

The migration from Britain to Brittany began in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Most of these migrants are believed to have come from the South West Peninsula and Wales. Given that this migration is thought to have started before the arrival of the Saxons this far west, and that these western areas were subject to Irish raiding at the time, some scholars (but, again, not all) are of the opinion that the Gaels, rather than the Anglo-Saxons, were the catalyst for this exodus. However, it was at its height during the second half of the sixth century (Hincks, p. 21).

As with Fergus Mór mac Eirc in Scotland, and Hengist and Horsa in England, Brittany too has its 'founder' in the shape of Conan Meriadoc. In keeping with many characters from this time, it is not known with certainty whether Conan is an historical or 'legendary' figure. He is recorded in two medieval texts, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and also *The Dream of Macsen Wledig* from the *White Book of Rhydderch*.

Macsen Wledig (the Welsh name for Magnus Maximus – as also mentioned in the Dafydd Iwan song *Yma o Hyd*) was born in Galicia and became commander of the armed forces in Britain in the late fourth century. Having usurped the throne of the Western Roman Empire from Gratian, Magnus himself would become Emperor of Britain, Gaul, Iberia and North Africa from 383 – 388. As a reward for his loyalty, Macsen 'gave' Armorica to Conan, who is often listed as the first 'ruler of Brittany', a task he most likely carried out from Vannes - in Breton 'Gwened', (names reminiscent of the Veneti tribe who had fought Caesar 500 years earlier). The name Armorica is itself taken from Gaulish, and is therefore quite similar to the Brittonic. It means land by the sea (e.g. *ar y môr* in Welsh).

Image: View of the Armorican Peninsula from space showing the South West Peninsula of Great Britain immediately above it.

The Welsh Connection: the seven founding saints



- ▶ Paul Aurelian
- ▶ Brioc
- ▶ Corentin
- ▶ Malo
- ▶ Padarn
- ▶ Samson of Dol
- ▶ Tudwal

Paul Aurelian, also known as Saint-Pol-de-Léon, after whom the eponymous town is named, was born in Glamorgan and educated at Llantwit Major and Caldey Island. He went to Brittany, particularly the **Bro Leon** region, and established monasteries there in the extreme north west, and islands off the same coast. Saint Brioc was born in Ceredigion. He became the first abbot of Sant Brieg/Saint Brieuc, the town which bears his name. Saint Corentin, on the other hand, is a native of Brittany, born in Cornouaille (the Breton equivalent of Cornwall, known in Breton as **Bro Gernev**) of which he is the patron saint. He was the first bishop of Kemper/Quimper.

Saint Malo, who was born in Gwent, similarly has that town named after him. Indeed, he founded the monastery there. Saint Padarn, like Saint Brioc, was born in Ceredigion. His name can be seen in the Welsh place-name Llanbadarn, but he also established a monastery in Gwened/Vannes in **Bro Wened**. Saint Samson was yet another native of south Wales, and like Paul Aurelian, was educated at Llantwit Major and Caldey. He established the monastery at Dol-de-Bretagne. Saint Tudwal was a native of modern-day Pembrokeshire and the town of Landreger/Tréguier in Brittany's **Bro Dreger** region was built around the monastery established by him. The towns established by these Saints extend all over Brittany, and the *Tro Breizh* (Tour of Brittany) is a 600km (370 mile) pilgrimage passing through all seven.

With the exception of Saint Corentin, it can be seen that all of these saints came from the country that is now called Wales. This is an important point as far as remembering the common Brittonic origins of both the Welsh and the Bretons is concerned. It should be noted, however, that in the fifth and sixth centuries, when these saints lived, there would have been little sense of being either 'Welsh' or 'Breton', but rather Britons who moved between 'Great' and 'Little' Britain.

Image: St. Pol de Leon at the parish church of Saint-Thegonnec (courtesy of Sjwells53)

The South West Connection: New Devon and New Cornwall



- ▶ Leon: a smaller land in the extreme north west
- ▶ Domnonea (Dumnonia): 'New Devon' occupied the central north to north east
- ▶ Kernev or Kerne: cognate with Cornwall, in the south west
- ▶ Bro Ereq or Bro Waroc'h: the influential Gwened or Vannetais region in the south east

As was the case with the formation of Scotland and England, the newly-settled colonies in Armorica were not a united polity at first. Instead, various sub-kingdoms, principalities or counties are recorded from as early as the fifth century. Several of these bore the names of the places they had left behind.

Leon, in the extreme north west (the area of Saint-Pol-de-Léon) was a small territory. The origins of the name are uncertain, with some arguing that it bears the name of Lyonesse from Arthurian legend, but a more likely interpretation is that it is cognate with Caerleon in south Wales (meaning Fortress of the Legion) and was initially either a home to military forces or else settled by them, in keeping with the story of Magnus Maximus. Next door to Leon was Dumnonia (Domnonea in Breton). This is definitely the same word as the Dumnonia in the south west of Britain, from which comes the modern English 'Devon'. There was large-scale emigration from here to Brittany, leading to the establishment of a 'New Devon' in the north of the Armorican Peninsula. Appropriately enough, to the south west of 'New Devon' stood 'New Cornwall', (Kernev or Kerne in Breton and Cornouaille in French – although the French name is not attested until the ninth century). The links between 'Old Cornwall' and 'New Cornwall' remained strong for centuries, not least through continued contact by sea.

The Gwened region, (Vannetais in French), alternatively known as Bro Ereq or Bro Warog is, unlike the others, not named after locations in Britain. The capital of this region is Vannes. It has a very distinctive dialect of the Breton language, which has led to various theories including that the Breton of this area shows Gaulish substrate, or that this south-eastern part of Brittany was settled by migrants from south Wales rather than the South West Peninsula. None of these has been conclusively proven.

In this early period, these separate petty kingdoms would vie for superiority, especially the larger three.

Image: early Breton principalities (http://www.wikiwand.com/br/Rouantelezhio%C3%B9_brezhon) also showing the central Poc'her/Poher region, closely associated with Kernev. Bro-C'hall is France.

Nominoe and the establishment of a united Brittany



- ▶ Single Breton state from ninth century
- ▶ Relations with Frankish empire turn sour after the death of Louis
- ▶ Nominoe refuses to accept authority of Charles the Bald
- ▶ Expansionist policies from Nominoe and his son Erispoe

Dumnonia was in the ascendancy in the seventh century, and was united with Gwened under king Judicael. The whole of Brittany, however, was under pressure from the Franks from the middle of the eighth century until the mid ninth, when it was eventually united under Nominoe, who is known in Breton as *Tad ar Vro* (the father of the country).

As a small country bordering the large empire of the Franks, it was customary for the Breton leaders to swear oaths to emperors such as Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious. This was effectively a means of ensuring that they kept internal control of their land and were not swallowed up by their much bigger neighbour.

Nominoe was appointed the first 'Duke' of all Brittany by Louis, although that title did not become established by convention until the following century, with Nominoe known variously as Duke, Prince, Ruler, Master, Governor and so on. Relations between the two men were good, but following Louis' death in 840, the empire temporarily fell apart into individual kingdoms and a more prickly relationship ensued between Nominoe and Charles the Bald, at that time king of West Francia. Charles tried to impose his authority onto Brittany, while Nominoe would regularly attempt to annex Frankish territory on his borders.

Things came to a head at the Battle of Ballon in 845, where Nominoe defeated Charles' forces, leading to a treaty between them. Nominoe died in 851, but his expansionist policies were to be continued by his successors, starting with his son Erispoe, who would himself win a decisive victory against Charles.

Image: *Tad ar Vro* (the father of the country) – an engraving of Nominoe triumphant, from *L'Histoire de Notre Bretagne*, 1922 by Jeanne Malivel.

Erispoe, Salomon, Alan, and the expanded Kingdom of Brittany



- ▶ Erispoe takes Rennes and Nantes
- ▶ Salomon pushes into Anjou and Normandy
- ▶ Alan the Great recognised as King
- ▶ Alan II repels Vikings but loses territory gained by Salomon

In 851, Erispoe defeated the Frankish army of Charles the Bald at the Battle of Jengland. This victory secured Breton independence. Known variously as Duke, Prince and King, Erispoe gained the lands shown in purple in the map above, which included the counties of Rennes and Nantes, two cities which over time would vie for the status of being Brittany's capital. Erispoe was assassinated in 857 by his cousin and successor, Salomon, who, following the treaties of Entrammes (863) and Compiègne (867) extended Breton territory even further to include western Anjou (marked above in blue) and Avranches and Coutances (green) respectively. Salomon was himself assassinated in 874 by a conspiracy which included Gurvand and Pascweten, his son-in-law. There then followed a period of infighting and Viking incursion, which did not come to an end until well into the rule of Alan the Great (r. 876 – 907) who succeeded in uniting the Bretons against a common Viking enemy, and ruled over all of the coloured territory above. Also variously described as both Duke and King of Brittany, Alan was the only Breton ruler whose use of the title King (*rex*) was approved by the Holy Roman Emperor. Following Alan's death, Brittany was overrun by Vikings for over thirty years until they were expelled to the east of the Loire by Alan the Great's grandson, Alan II (Alan 'Crooked Beard') in 938.

The territory regained by Alan II, however, had lost the land gained by Salomon, but the boundaries of Brittany would then remain relatively stable in the largely independent Duchy which existed from 939 until 1532, when it was united with the Kingdom of France. Even then, it was administered separately until its abolition at the time of the French Revolution. The extent of the current region of Brittany, created in 1941, does not correspond to the borders of the historical Duchy, with the Liger Atlantel/Loire Atlantique department based around Nantes having been lost to the neighbouring Pays de la Loire region. Brittany therefore lost a further fifth of its traditional territory as a result of regional reorganisation by the Vichy Government in World War II.

Image from Louis Élégoët, *Bretagne une histoire*, CRDP de Bretagne, 2000, p. 54. This book also has a Breton version *Istor Breizh*.

Origins of the Breton Language

Ni, Breizhiz a galon, karomp hon
gwir vro!
Brudet eo an Arvor dre ar bed tro-
dro.
Dispont 'kreiz ar brezel, hon tadoù
ken mat,
A skuilhas eviti o gwad.

O! Breizh, ma bro, me 'gar ma bro.
Tra ma vo mor 'vel mur 'n he
zro,
Ra vezo digabestr ma bro!

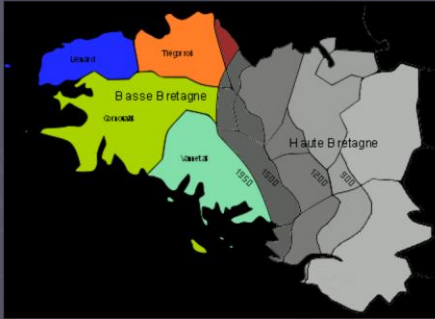
- Breton grew out of common Brittonic
- Gradual process over centuries
- Breton not spoken over all of Brittany
- This may have contributed to decline
- Definitely distinct language by second millennium

The people migrating to Brittany would have been speakers of Brittonic. The Breton language which grew out of it is the result of gradual separation from the other Brittonic languages over the course of sixteen centuries. It is worth remembering here that the geographical extent of Brittany and the Breton language are not one and the same. In circumstances similar to those of Scotland and Scottish Gaelic, there are some parts of Brittany where Breton has never been the dominant community language, particularly in the large eastern cities of Rennes and Nantes. The maximum extent of the Breton language is therefore only slightly larger than the area of Nominos's Brittany of the mid ninth century as shown on the previous slide (terracotta colour). Indeed, Breton expansion into areas where the language was not spoken has been rather ironically seen as contributing to its decline, by bringing it into greater contact with foreign influences (Hincks, p. 22).

There can be no doubt that the Breton of today is a distinctive language in its own right, however, as was the case with the splintering of the various Germanic, Romance and Slavic languages, this is not a situation which developed overnight. According to Rhisiart Hincks in *I Gadw Mamiaith Mor Hen*, until the tenth century we can think of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany as one linguistic and cultural unit whose peoples spoke a common 'lingua britannica' (p. 29). In similar fashion, John Morris Jones, (quoted in Ball and Fife's *The Celtic Languages* p. 78) notes that the Brittonic of the early medieval period 'underwent no material change between the sixth and ninth century – this is proved by the practical identity of Old Welsh and Old Breton'. The suggestion in Kenneth Jackson's *Language and History in Early Britain* (p. 5) that we should from the middle of the sixth century begin to speak of Welsh, Cornish and Breton 'as separating languages, and from the end of the century as separate', should therefore be considered with caution, with the first part perhaps true but with an intermediate period of some centuries which saw the emergence first of dialects and then separate languages.

Left slide: Words to first verse and chorus of *Bro Gozh ma Zadoù* the Breton National Anthem, which is sung to the tune of *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau*.

The Fate of the Breton Language



- ▶ Westward retreat over the centuries
- ▶ Traditionally spoken in 'Lower Brittany'
- ▶ Between 200,000 and 250,000 speakers today
- ▶ Classified as severely endangered, but with some Breton medium education

The map in the above slide shows the areas where Breton is still spoken today, roughly west of a line from Saint-Brieg/Saint Brieuc to Gwened/Vannes in the region known as Breizh Izel/Basse Bretagne (Lower Brittany). The colours mark the traditional 'dialect' areas. The dark blue of the north west is **Bro Leon**, the orange to the east of it is **Bro Dreger**, the western part of the old Domnonea. **Bro Gernev** is highlighted in green and **Bro Wened** in turquoise. These dialect boundaries, which happen to coincide exactly with those of medieval bishoprics, are largely a fiction, with the exception of Bro Wened, which is truly distinctive. Like many languages, Breton has a dialect continuum, with minor changes from one village to the next. The area shown in the map is that of the old (five department) Duchy of Brittany which existed from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries (i.e. including Liger Atlantel/Loire Atlantique) rather than the current four department region.

The grey colours in Breizh Uhel/Haute Bretagne (Upper Brittany) reflect the westward decline of the language, starting in the extreme east, where the language has never been spoken, and from there, the approximate eastern limits of the language in the years 900, 1200, 1500 and 1950 respectively.

Today, between 200,000 and 250,000 people speak Breton, down from over a million speakers a century ago. Some 75% of these, however, are over the age of 65, and so the language is classified as severely endangered by UNESCO. There has nevertheless been an increase in Breton language education since the 1970s, and Breton language schools receive some support from the regional government of Brittany, but none from the central French state which does not support tuition in any language other than French. Whether the increase in new speakers will compensate for the loss of existing ones remains to be seen.