

Legacy: The Naming of Britain

- "Britons", "Welsh" and "Cymry" are names which to some extent overlap and refer to the same people. The list opposite shows examples of places which are still named after them>>>>>
- ▶ Britain
 - ▶ Brittany
 - ▶ Dumbarton
 - ▶ Wales
 - ▶ Cornwall
 - ▶ Walton
 - ▶ Wallasey
 - ▶ Cymru
 - ▶ Cumbria
 - ▶ Cumbrae

By the second millennium, the Britons had splintered into three, now distinct, peoples. Nevertheless, the shared origins of the Welsh, Cornish and Bretons were still well known long after this. All in all, if we take Pytheas' naming of the *Pretani* in the fourth century BCE as marking the start of this process, then it is no exaggeration to claim that the Britons were labelled as such for approximately 2000 years. Conversely, it is worth emphasising again that the English and the Scots were not called "Britons" until the eighteenth century, largely as a result of the Act of Union of 1707. Bede, for example, lists the British as only one of the four nations present on the island, albeit the one from whom the island had initially "derived its name".

As shown in Unit 2, Brittonic place-names can still be seen (even if not recognised as such by those who see them) all over the island from Dover to Lanark and from Dawlish to Melrose, and this is clearly a legacy from earlier times. However, the name of the people themselves has also been preserved, sometimes in place-names given to them by outsiders. The three labels *Britons*, *Welsh* and *Cymry* are a reflection of this and broadly refer to the same peoples, although admittedly in reduced territory as time went on.

Britons is the oldest and most established term, used by insiders and outsiders alike, and gives us both *Britain* and *Brittany* ("land of the Britons") as well as *Dumbarton* ("fortress of the Britons").

Welsh is a name given to the Britons by the Anglo-Saxons, and not used by the "Welsh" for themselves until the modern era (as a result of learning English). *Wales* is the "land of the Welsh", *Cornwall* the "horned-land of the Welsh", *Walton* the "town of the Welsh", *Wallasey* the "island of the Welsh" etc.

Cymry is a name given by the Britons to themselves meaning "fellow countrymen". It is cognate with the word *comrade*, and a newer word than *Britons*. It likely grew in frequency after the South West Peninsula was cut off, as its use is restricted to Wales and the "Old North" of northern England and southern Scotland, as illustrated in *Cymru*, *Cumbria* and *Cumberland* - all variations of "land of the Britons/Welsh/Cymric people" - and *Cumbrae* ("island of the Britons/Welsh/Cymric people").

Legacy: The Saints of Britain



- ▶ Ninian: Missionary to the Picts
 - ▶ Patrick: Patron Saint of Ireland
 - ▶ Dubric: first Bishop of Llandaff *
 - ▶ Congar: Bishop in Somerset
 - ▶ Kea: Bishop in Cornwall/Brittany
 - ▶ Petroc: Saint of Cornwall/Devon
 - ▶ Illtud: Monastic School Founder
 - ▶ Cadoc: Tutor/Abbot of Llancarfan
 - ▶ David: Patron Saint of Wales
 - ▶ Gildas: Monk and Historian
 - ▶ Teilo: Bishop of Llandaff *
 - ▶ Deiniol: first Bishop of Bangor
 - ▶ Asaph: first Bishop of Saint Asaph
 - ▶ Kentigern: Patron Saint of Glasgow
- ...to name but a few!

The fifth and sixth centuries in Britain are often referred to as the “Age of Saints” due to the preponderance of influential religious figures from this time. We have already seen some of them in the “seven founding saints” of Brittany in Unit 7. To these can be added an impressive array of other names, some of which are listed above. All of these were Britons, and include the first or founding bishops of all four of Wales’ traditional dioceses (in addition to being patron saint of Wales, Saint David (*Dewi Sant*) was Bishop of St David’s). Also included are Saint Illtud and Saint Cadoc, who were leading figures in the establishment of what was probably Britain’s first college at Llantwit Major, an institution where many of those named here received their education.

Some have been immortalised in place-names, such as for example *Croagh Patrick* in County Mayo, *Congresbury* (after Congar) in Somerset, *Kea* and *Padstow* (after Petroc) both in Cornwall, *Llanilltud Fawr* (Illtud), *Llangatwg* (Cadoc), *Tyddewi* (David), *Llandeilo* (Teilo) and *Saint Asaph* in Wales, and *Gildas de Rhuys* in Brittany. Kentigern is known in Scotland as Mungo, and there are various dedications to both him and Ninian there. Many of these saints appear as characters in later Arthurian legends, and have had their “lives” put into writing, mostly in Latin, but also in other languages, such as the Cornish language *Beunans Ke* (the Life of Kea).

* *Bishop of Llandaff* did not become a recognised title until the second millennium, although the territory covered by these earlier bishops largely corresponded to the area of South East Wales that would comprise it. Dubric (*Dyfrig*) was the first holder of this position and he was succeeded by Teilo.

Image: Stained glass window of Illtud at Holy Trinity Church, Abergavenny (courtesy of Gwenddwr)

Legacy: The Ruin of Britain



► ...it is my present purpose to relate the deeds of an indolent and slothful race... (Gildas, I.1)

One of the saints listed on the previous slide went on to produce a scathing criticism of the Britons' role in the advent of the Saxons, implying that they had in effect brought retribution upon themselves as a result of their ungodly behaviour. *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain) was written by Gildas in the sixth century and is the only significant British source from either that century or the previous one. It was not intended primarily as a history, indeed, it contains considerably more "preaching" than "teaching". However, due to the lack of any other sources, it has inevitably had a rather disproportionate influence on our view of events.

Despite including himself in their number, as shown by his "*our countrymen*" reference (II. 26). Gildas' view of his fellow-countrymen is bitterly harsh. Boudicca, deemed worthy of a statue in later times, is described by him as a "*deceitful lioness*" (II. 6) and the Britons in general are "*neither brave in war nor faithful in time of peace*" (ibid). The effect of the Roman occupation was "*to reduce their necks to the yoke, and their soil to the vassalage of a Roman province*" (II.7), while, following their departure, they "*groaned...for many years under the cruelty of two foreign nations*" (II.14) namely the Picts and the Scots. They were "*impotent in repelling foreign foes, but bold and invincible in raising civil war*" (II. 21) and so looked to the Saxons to expel their enemies instead. This was an act of great folly which saw "*the fire of vengeance, justly kindled by former crimes, spread from sea to sea*" (II. 24). Intentionally or not, Gildas' legacy has been to create an overwhelmingly negative image of a people who morph almost immediately from servants of the Romans to servants of the Saxons. This, despite the fact that, during his lifetime, the greater part of Britain was still in the Britons' hands. His narrative has influenced many others since, most notably Bede.

Three hundred years after Gildas, the English, French and Bretons all saw the Viking raids as a similar punishment from God, and so "retribution" can be seen as a recurring theme in the Christian countries of early medieval Europe. Their image, however, has not been so badly tainted as that of the Britons.

Image: Statue of Gildas in the village of Saint Gildas de Rhuys in the Morbihan department of Brittany (courtesy of Romary)

Legacy: The Matter of Britain



- ▶ Arthur
- ▶ Guinevere
- ▶ Merlin
- ▶ Uther Pendragon
- ▶ Mordred
- ▶ Morgan le Fay
- ▶ Brutus of Troy
- ▶ King Lear
- ▶ Coel Hen

De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae provided the catalyst for more positive stories of the Britons to be written by later authors, possibly to counter Gildas' negativity and regain some pride at a time when it would have been sorely needed.

The "Matter of Britain" is a literary cycle, one of the Three Classic Matters of medieval Europe, the other two being the "Matter of France" and the "Matter of Rome". "Britain" here can be interpreted as meaning both "Great" and "Little" Britain (i.e. Brittany). The main attraction is undoubtedly the legend of Arthur, but it also contains some other notable stories including those of Brutus of Troy, King Lear and Coel Hen. The two major works in the "Matter", both written in Latin, are:

The *Historia Brittonum* (History of Britain), which contains the first reliably datable reference to Arthur and the story of his twelve battles. Written in the ninth century, it has traditionally been attributed to Nennius, although his historicity is open to question, with some believing it a compilation by several authors. This work also includes the first reference to Brutus of Troy as the "founder" of Britain (which is supposedly named after Brutus).

The *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), a twelfth century work by Geoffrey of Monmouth. He embellishes the Arthurian legend and introduces us to Guinevere and Uther Pendragon, as well as King Lear, and, in other works, the characters of Merlin and Morgan le Fay.

The legacy of these works can clearly be seen from the way they have spread widely and been adopted by other cultures, in particular the French, via Chrétien de Troyes, who created Lancelot, and the English, via Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which, despite the title, was written in English. The Arthurian character is so popular that a series of books has been written on "*The Arthur of the Welsh*" "*The Arthur of the French*" "*The Arthur of the English*" "*The Arthur of the Germans*" and so on.

Image: King Arthur as one of the Nine Worthies from the "Christian Heroes Tapestry" in The Cloisters, New York. Dated c. 1385.

The Renaming of Britain and the Coming of the Celts



- ▶ Significant events in the year 1707
- ▶ Formation of the Kingdom of Great Britain
- ▶ Publication of *Archaeologia Britannica*

Towards the end of the ninth century, Bishop Asser, who was himself Welsh, wrote his *Life of King Alfred*. In it he notes that Offa's Dyke separates Mercia from Britannia. By *Britannia*, he here means not Britain, but Wales, the predominant "Land of the Britons" still remaining at the time. This is an example of naming the land after its people. More recent times, however, have seen an increase in the reverse process of naming the people after the land.

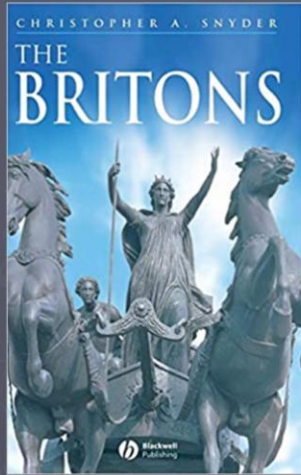
Following the Union of the Crowns in 1603, King James liked to style himself as "King of Great Britain and Ireland", but no legal kingdom of Great Britain would exist until the Act of Union came into force on 1 May 1707. Following this, all the kingdom's subjects, English and Scottish as well as "Welsh" would now be "Britons", in some cases, whether they liked it or not.

In that same year Edward Lhuyd published his *Archaeologia Britannica: Giving Some Account Additional to what Has Been Hitherto Publish'd, of the Languages, Histories and Customs of the Original Inhabitants of Great Britain*. This work (correctly) noted for the first time the links between the Gaulish, Brittonic and Goidelic languages, and used the label "Celtic" as a name for this grouping.

And so, in 1707, about 1200 years of tradition suddenly changed when the English and the Scots became "new" Britons, whilst the "old" Britons, the Welsh and Cornish, became "Celts" and also remained as Britons in the new context. This ambiguity between "ancient" Britons and "modern" ones could therefore result in considerable confusion and led Sir John Rhys to introduce the Welsh word *Brython* to the English language in the nineteenth century to refer to a Briton of the original traditional kind, with *Brythonic* as the name for their language. *Brittonic* was the term preferred by Kenneth Jackson in his 1953 work *Language and History in Early Britain* and has predominantly been used here.

Image: the flag of the Kingdom of Great Britain (1707-1800) - a composite design representing the "new" Britons, but sadly lacking any space for the original ones.

Conclusion: Positive and Negative Histories



- ▶ Any history can be written in a positive or negative manner
- ▶ Most histories of the Britons were largely negative
- ▶ Recent works have cast them in a more positive light

History, so the saying goes, is written by the victors, and there can be no doubt that, over the fullness of time, the Britons lost the vast majority of what had been their land to the English, and to a lesser extent, the Scots. Nevertheless, any history can have a positive or negative slant put on it, and this will largely depend upon the emphasis or bias of the writer.

A positive history of England, for example, could claim that the country was the driving force behind the formation of the United Kingdom and, after that, an Empire which covered over a quarter of the land surface of the World. Its language has spread to all corners of the planet and become the most influential ever known. A negative history might suggest that England did not come into existence until the tenth century, and even then spent virtually all of its time as an independent country being ruled by foreign dynasties. As for the language, half of it is not English anyway.

In the case of the Britons, their story did not get off to the greatest of starts, being initially told by outsiders, principally Romans, and negative insiders such as Gildas. This negative image was also the predominant one, unsurprisingly, in works like the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. More positive works were in evidence during the medieval period, but the overall picture in recent centuries has been a negative one, especially during the years when the United Kingdom and France were at their imperial peak.

The last thirty years or so, however, have seen a reinterpretation of the historical roles of different peoples, and a more positive interpretation of the contribution of the Britons. The idea that they were no more than a subservient people who simply “switched masters” every now and then has recently been challenged, to reveal a people who have, often in the face of overwhelming opposition, stubbornly clung on to their own languages and identity, and are, as Dafydd Iwan put it in his song *Yma o Hyd*, despite everyone and everything, still here.

Image: front cover of *The Britons* by Christopher Snyder, a book with a perhaps more positive account of their history than has often been the case.