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and characters, from King Offa to Alfred the Great,
to produce a coherent and compelling narrative
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‘Magisterial . . . Morris is an excellent storyteller, in
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accessible to the lay reader without surrendering
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‘A sweeping but detailed analysis of the Anglo-Saxons over
a period of six centuries . . . Morris shines a fresh light on the
Anglo-Saxon age as the epoch of medieval history’
BBC History Magazine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Marc Morris is a historian who specialises in the Middle Ages. He studied and taught at the universities of London and Oxford and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. His other books include a bestselling history of the Norman Conquest and highly acclaimed biographies of King John and Edward I (*A Great and Terrible King*). He also presented the TV series *Castle* and wrote its accompanying book. He contributes regularly to other history programmes on radio and television and writes for numerous journals and magazines.

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Penguin
Random House
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First published by Hutchinson 2021
Published in Penguin Books 2022
001

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Typeset in 10.45/12.2 pt Bembo
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–529–15698–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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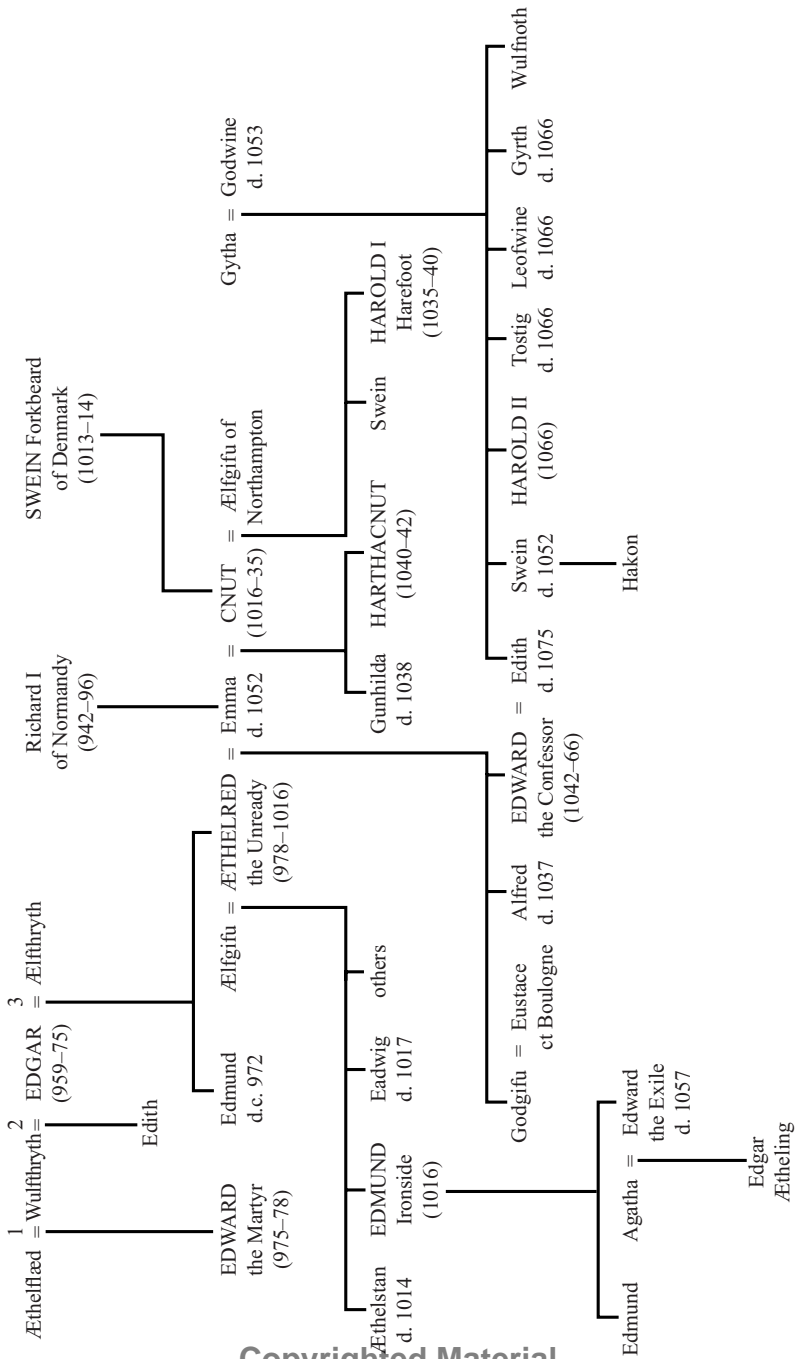
To my father

TOM MORRIS

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Acknowledgements

My thanks to everyone who helped with the creation of this book. To Sophie Ambler, Mark Edwards, Helen Gittos, Ryan Kemp and Melanie Marshall for supplying advice, articles and translations, and to Rory Naismith for his expert assistance in tracking down images of coins. I should particularly like to thank Richard Abels, Guy Halsall, Charles Insley, John Maddicott and Howard Williams, who kindly read various chapters of the book in draft and offered valuable criticisms. Most especially, I must thank Levi Roach, who read almost half the whole book, and patiently answered many emails over the years it took me to write it.

At Hutchinson it has been a great pleasure to work with Anna Argenio, who edited the book with rigour, intelligence and good humour, and with David Milner, who copy-edited the finished draft with his usual keen-eyed professionalism. My thanks also to Josh Ireland for proof-reading the whole text, to Martin Lubikowski for drawing the maps, and to Rose Waddilove for her patient pursuit of all the pictures. I am very grateful to Sarah Rigby and Jocasta Hamilton for commissioning the book back in 2016, and to my agent, Julian Alexander, for almost twenty years of guidance and friendship.

Lastly, thanks to Cie, Peter and William, for their love and support.

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of writing this book, I asked numerous people to name the first thing that came to mind when they thought about the Anglo-Saxons. Naturally there were a wide variety of answers, but two in particular were mentioned over and over again. The first was the Sutton Hoo treasure, discovered in 1939, and now kept in the British Museum. The second was the death of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, famously fought in 1066.

Neither of these was surprising: the Sutton Hoo treasure, placed in a ship with its original owner in the early seventh century and then concealed under a giant mound, remains the most impressive collection of Anglo-Saxon objects ever unearthed. Even if you're not familiar with it by name, you would almost certainly recognize its most famous items. The helmet, with its distinctive face-mask, has featured on the cover of countless books and magazines. King Harold's death at Hastings, meanwhile, is well known because it led directly to the Norman Conquest, and because it is depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry, another of the world's most famous artistic survivals.

But what did these two most popular 'Anglo-Saxon' associations have in common with each other? They were separated by almost half a millennium, during which there had been an enormous amount of change. Harold was the ruler of a single kingdom, which contemporaries called England, with boundaries very close to where they are today. It was peaceful and prosperous, with an expanding economy, an abundant silver coinage, and dozens of towns, cities and ports. It was also a Christian country,



1. The Sutton Hoo helmet.

with sixteen cathedrals, around sixty monasteries, and thousands of local churches.

At the time of the Sutton Hoo burial, the picture was very different. What would eventually become England was a gaggle of smaller kingdoms, all vying against each other for temporary advantage. None of them had a settlement of more than a few hundred people, or silver coins, or much in the way of trade.



2. The Bayeux Tapestry: the death of King Harold.

Nor was there much organized Christianity, which had arrived only a generation earlier, and had so far made very little progress: almost everyone was still pagan, worshipping gods like Thunor, Frig and Woden. King Harold, who lived in a world of bishops, boroughs, shires and sheriffs, would probably have felt far more at home with the English of the later Middle Ages than the people who had buried their lord in a boat over four centuries earlier. Those intervening centuries had been ones of fundamental transformation.

Generalisations about ‘the Anglo-Saxons’ are consequently difficult, and, unless made at the most simplistic levels, fairly redundant. It is as meaningful to talk about ‘Anglo-Saxon warfare’, for instance, as it would be to generalize about military tactics between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In this book, therefore,

I have for the most part avoided wide-ranging discussions, and tried to chart major social and political developments as they occurred. Each chapter seeks to explore the dominant theme of a particular era. Chapter 3, for example, discusses the second half of the seventh century, which saw the dynamic expansion of Christianity, and the foundation of monasteries and bishoprics. Of course, there were other important things happening in Britain during this time, and these are also discussed, but only as secondary concerns. This approach has meant that a lot of material has inevitably ended up on the cutting-room floor, but it is impossible to write about a period that spans more than seven centuries, from Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, without being selective. By confining myself to one major theme per chapter, my hope has been to create a clearer story.

In the case of most chapters, I have also concentrated on one particular historical character. Four are focused on individual kings, two on individual bishops, and one on an individual family (the Godwinesons). Again, this was primarily in the interests of narrative clarity, and because biography is a way of framing events in relatable, human terms. At the same time, I wanted the book to be more than just a series of unrelated portraits, so there is plenty of non-biographical material included in each chapter, exploring the book's wider themes and linking one chapter to the next. This is not intended as a series of potted histories, but as an account of the emergence of the English and the development of England.

Sadly, none of the chapters is focused on a woman, because there is simply not enough evidence to sustain such an extended treatment. In the case of certain kings and bishops, we are lucky to have contemporary accounts of their lives, but in the case of queens or abbesses, no such source material has survived. The Venerable Bede provides a few brief sections on particular religious women in his mammoth *Ecclesiastical History*, written in the early eighth century. After that, there are no narrative sources about women until the mid-eleventh century, when two queens, Emma and Edith, commissioned political tracts that touched on aspects

of their careers. Yet even these late sources, valuable as they are, contain insufficient material to support an entire chapter. Frustratingly, there are periods where we can discern that certain women were playing a pivotal political role. On several occasions in the tenth century, young kings come and go in quick succession, while their mothers continue at court from one reign to the next, appearing as the leading witnesses to royal charters. But powerful though these women were, their activities are otherwise unrecorded, and their personalities and careers are unrecoverable.

This gap in the evidence might seem surprising, given that the Anglo-Saxon era is often thought of as having been a golden age for women. Since the late eighteenth century, it has been a commonplace that women in England had better rights before the Norman Conquest than they did afterwards, and were held in higher esteem by society. Before 1066, said one eminent historian in the mid-twentieth century, men and women enjoyed 'a rough and ready partnership'.¹ As so often with golden ages, however, this picture rests on a selective reading of very limited and debatable evidence. One of its principal props is an account of German women written by the Roman historian Tacitus towards the end of the first century AD. These women, claimed Tacitus, were virtuous, frugal and chaste, and supported their sons and husbands by encouraging them to acts of valour. But this was simply a Roman praising 'barbarian' society in order to criticize his own. German women were portrayed as laudable because, unlike their Roman counterparts, they did not conduct adulterous affairs or waste their time at baths and theatres. The reality, unfortunately, seems to be that the status of women in first-century Germany and Anglo-Saxon England was no better than it was in later centuries.²

The same is largely true in the case of Anglo-Saxon men. The argument that the pre-Conquest period was a golden age for people in general has an even longer history. When England broke with Rome in the sixteenth century, scholars sought to prove that the Anglo-Saxon Church had originally been a pristine, home-grown institution, unsullied by papal influence. During the

Civil War of the seventeenth century, Parliamentarians argued that the freedoms and representative powers they were fighting for had once belonged to their Anglo-Saxon ancestors and been lost in 1066. Almost all of this was myth, but it was enduring and pervasive. In the late nineteenth century it took on a sinister edge when people began to extol the supposed racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, leading some scholars today to suggest that the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' should be abandoned.³

Needless to say, given the title of this book, I do not agree with that suggestion. The term 'Anglo-Saxon', it is true, was not much used by the people we refer to by that name, who tended to think of themselves as either 'Angles' or 'Saxons'. But it was used in the late ninth century by Alfred the Great, who commonly styled himself 'king of the Anglo-Saxons', and also by several of his tenth-century successors. In addition, the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' as a convenient means of describing the various English-speaking peoples who lived in lowland Britain between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans has a long-established history, stretching back at least 400 years.

What is important is that we attempt to see these people as they were, and try to shed the misconceptions about them that have developed in later centuries. This is not easy, for they come laden with much accumulated baggage. The enthusiastic revival of Anglo-Saxon personal names in the nineteenth century makes it hard not to think of the various Alfreds, Ediths and Harolds in this story as honorary Victorians. The reality, of course, is that they were very different, both to us, and to our more immediate forebears. In looking at their lives we will see many things that may strike us as admirable: their courage, their piety, their resourcefulness, their artistry, and their professed love of freedom. But we will also find much that is disconcerting: their brutality, their intolerance, their misogyny, and their reliance on the labour of slaves. Their society produced works of art that continue to dazzle, and institutions that are still with us today, but it was highly unequal, patriarchal, persecuting and theocratic. Their difference to us, even though they possessed certain similarities,

Introduction

is what renders them fascinating. We need to understand them, but we do not need to idolize them.

Our understanding of the Anglo-Saxons must ultimately rest on the historical sources, but for most of the period these are extremely meagre. For the first two centuries after the end of Roman rule, we have virtually no written records of any kind, and are almost entirely reliant on archaeology. The situation improves as the period progresses, and richer material survives, but there are still huge gaps in our knowledge. Sometimes major events are known to us only because of an allusive reference in a charter or a single excavated coin. Often they can only be surmised, because we have no direct evidence at all.

The less evidence, the more contention. The fact that so much is debatable means that the academic arguments are endless. Engaging with them is like navigating a huge, fast-flowing river, fed by a thousand streams of scholarship, and attempting to summarize them is as foolhardy as trying to freeze a waterfall. A definitive history of this period is impossible. What follows is the reading of the evidence that seems most plausible to me, and the arguments I have found the most persuasive. I have tried to show my reasoning whenever possible, without compromising the course of the story, because the story ought to seem remarkable. Like an old reciter of tales, called on by the king to relate the events of earlier times, I hope my audience will be entertained.



1

THE RUIN OF BRITAIN

The Fall of Rome and the Coming of the Saxons

In November 1992 a farmer named Peter Whatling lost his hammer in a field near the village of Hoxne (pronounced ‘Hoxen’) in Suffolk. Unwilling to accept that it was gone forever, he enlisted the help of a friend, Eric Lawes, who had been given a metal detector as a retirement gift. Lawes, obtaining a strong signal, began to dig, and made a discovery so startling that he immediately contacted both the police and the local authorities. The next day a team from the Suffolk Archaeological Unit arrived and completed the excavation in conditions of considerable secrecy.

What Mr Lawes had found turned out to be one of the most spectacular hoards of Roman treasure ever unearthed in Britain. It included twenty-nine pieces of gold jewellery – bracelets, rings, necklaces and an extremely rare body-chain, decorated with precious stones. There was also a rich array of silver tableware – bowls and dishes, ornately wrought pepper pots in the shape of animal and human figures, and almost a hundred spoons and ladles. Most significantly, there was a vast quantity of coins – 584 of gold and over 14,000 of silver. This alone made it a truly exceptional discovery, at a stroke nearly doubling the number of coins that have come down to us from late Roman Britain. They also found Mr Whatling’s hammer.

A find like the Hoxne Hoard (colour picture 1) – now in the keeping of the British Museum, along with the celebrated hammer – immediately raises all sorts of questions. Who owned it? Who buried it? When, and why? Usually such questions cannot be answered with any certainty, but in this particular case there were some useful clues. Several of the spoons have names inscribed on them, and by far the most frequently occurring name is Aurelius Ursicinus. Unfortunately we have no idea who he was, since he is not mentioned in any of the written sources for Roman Britain, but presumably he was the owner of the spoons and therefore possibly the owner of the entire treasure. What we cannot say for sure is whether he was still alive at the time it was buried. But when it comes to determining when that time was, we are on firmer ground, thanks to the presence of the coins. These can be dated from the images of the emperors that appear on them, and the latest examples in the hoard were minted between AD 407 and 408. How soon after that date the hoard was buried is another matter.¹

That leaves the most crucial question of all: why was this rich selection of precious objects and vast amount of money hidden in the earth? Experts these days are generally cautious on making definite pronouncements on such matters, and will point to a variety of possible motives. Sometimes such treasures are buried with their former owners and therefore constitute grave goods. Other times the context of the site might indicate a votive offering – if, for instance, treasure had been thrown down a well, or buried near a shrine. But while such ritual explanations are always possible, there is one paramount factor that consistently prompted people in all periods to conceal their valuables in the ground, and that was fear – fear that those valuables might otherwise be taken from them by force. When the numbers of known hoards in the British Isles across the centuries are plotted on a graph, the greatest spike by a very long margin occurs during the Civil War of the 1640s, but there are also sharp increases at the time of the Norman Conquest and the viking invasions. In 1667, the diarist Samuel Pepys was sufficiently spooked by a

Dutch raid on the Thames that he grabbed all the gold coins he had in London and sent his wife to bury them on their country estate in Cambridgeshire.

Fear was always balanced by hope. Those who concealed their valuables in the ground when danger threatened evidently did so in the hope of recovering them once the threat had passed, and it seems likely that this was the intention of whoever buried the Hoxne Hoard. The treasure had been carefully packed into an oak chest, which decomposed apart from traces of its hinges and locks, and within the chest some items had been stowed in smaller wooden boxes or wrapped in fabric. Clearly this was no robber's swag. The person who deposited it had done so with great care, almost certainly intending to return and dig it up when they judged conditions were safer, just as Samuel Pepys did with his coins in the autumn of 1667. Unlike Pepys, the owner of the Hoxne Hoard never got to do so.

Hoard, then, in the words of the historian John Maddicott, are 'reliable barometers of unrest'. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Hoxne treasure to non-experts is that it was far from unique: well over a thousand other hoards have been unearthed from all over Roman Britain. Few are as rich as the one found at Hoxne, though several of similar quality have been uncovered in the same region of East Anglia, at Mildenhall, Eye and Thetford. The majority of these finds are datable to the fourth century AD, and the rate of deposit increases markedly as that century progresses. By AD 400, based only on those that have been found and recorded in the modern age, the wealthy elite of Roman Britain were between them burying hoards at an average of ten a year.²

The reason for their behaviour is not hard to comprehend, for by that date the Roman Empire was in a deeply disturbed state, and no corner of it more so than its northernmost province, Britannia.

By the time the Hoxne Hoard was buried, the Romans had been involved with Britain for almost half a millennium. Julius Caesar

had led the first military incursions in 55 BC, but had failed to annex any territory. It was not until nearly a century later, in AD 43, that a full-scale conquest was launched by the emperor Claudius, who obtained the submission of the island's southern rulers, impressing them with the might of a military that could transport war elephants across the Channel. It took a further forty years of campaigning to subdue the remainder of the lowlands, interrupted by the famous revolt of Boudicca in AD 60, but by the end of the first century the contours of power in what was now Roman Britain had been established.

In that same period, and into the second century, all the familiar hallmarks of Roman civilization were introduced. Towns and cities appeared in Britain for the first time, laid out to rigid grid-plans, and within them bathhouses, theatres, temples, monuments and basilicas, all built expensively in stone, some of them faced with marble. The greatest city of all was London, founded soon after Claudius' invasion to serve as an administrative hub for the newly acquired province. With walls some two miles long and enclosing an area of 330 acres, it was home to a population of perhaps 50,000 people, and its forum was the largest north of the Alps.

Linking the thirty cities and seventy or so towns was an infrastructure so extensive and impressive that it would not be replicated in Britain for more than a thousand years. Roads connected the new urban centres to each other and to their agricultural hinterlands, bridges were built over major rivers, and rivers were linked together by the construction of canals. These feats of engineering were designed principally for the benefit of the army, but they also facilitated trade with the rest of the empire. Ships came to Britain carrying produce and products from across Europe and beyond, on a scale that would not be matched until the end of the Middle Ages.³

Life for some in Roman Britain was therefore extremely good. In the countryside, and in the towns, the rich lived in villas that had dozens of rooms, frescoed walls, mosaic floors, indoor plumbing and underfloor heating. They drank imported wine and cooked with imported olive oil, enjoying a level of luxury

that any British aristocrat before the eighteenth century would have envied. But for many others, life cannot have been nearly so pleasant. Because of its obvious grandeur and sophistication, the Roman Empire has traditionally excited admiration, but latterly some experts have emphasized that the extreme wealth of the elite depended on the aggressive exploitation of the majority of the population, who are for the most part absent from the archaeological and written records. In the 1960s, a cemetery was discovered at Poundbury in Dorset, just outside the Roman town of Dorchester, containing the remains of over 1,200 ordinary fourth-century Britons. The majority of bones showed signs of wear and tear associated with years of hard labour and long-term malnutrition. In the estimation of the historian David Mattingly, 'for every winner under Roman rule there were a hundred losers'.⁴

That said, for those at the bottom of the ladder, life in Britain before the arrival of the Romans was not necessarily any nicer, for slavery was an equally common condition in Celtic society. Moreover, other historians would argue that the immense sophistication and complexity of the Roman economy brought benefits to everybody, albeit not to the same degree. The sheer amount of ceramic found in archaeological digs of Roman sites shows it was produced on an industrial scale, turned on potter's wheels and fired in high-temperature kilns, meaning everyone had access to good-quality plates, bowls and jugs, and even humble buildings like barns and cowsheds had tiled roofs. It is a reasonable assumption that more perishable items – ironmongery, leather goods and textiles – were also being mass-produced. The Romans also improved agricultural productivity by introducing a heavy plough that turned the soil, replacing the inferior kind which merely scratched the surface. Fens were drained and forests were cleared. The population grew to somewhere between 2 million and 6 million, a density that even at the lowest estimate would not be reached again until the time of the Norman Conquest. Roman towns and cities, being carefully designed with drains and sewers, had better sanitation than their medieval successors. The Britons had known coin before the coming of

the Romans, but nothing like the volume that was in circulation afterwards. And this level of sophistication demanded literacy. At one time it was a requirement that every soldier in the Roman army should be able to read. That requirement was eventually dropped, but in order for international trade to flourish, and government to function, a great many people had to be literate.⁵

The Romans – and from the start of the third century, everybody living in the empire was considered a Roman citizen, whatever their ancestry – assumed all this would last forever, for the empire was eternal. And yet, within the space of a single lifetime, it was all gone. The towns and cities crumbled and fell into ruin, the coinage ceased to be minted, and the most basic commodities disappeared, leaving people to scratch and scavenge for a living, or to prey on the more vulnerable.⁶

So what went wrong?

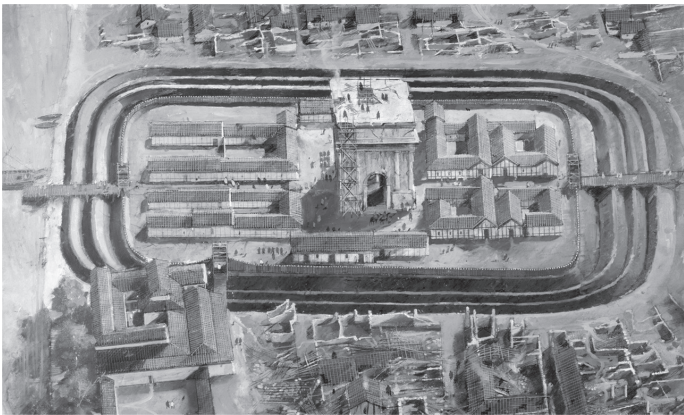
The prosperity of the Roman Empire depended on peace, and that peace was provided by its army – a soldiery that was well trained, well paid, and well equipped, armed with mass-produced weapons and ingenious machines of war. In Britain, having quelled the population of the lowlands within a few decades of Claudius' invasion, the army found itself permanently stationed against the upland regions of the island, which were harder to conquer and economically less worth the effort. Legionary fortresses, each capable of accommodating thousands of men, were established at Caerleon, Chester and York, and from these main bases an extensive network of garrison forts was spread through the hills and valleys beyond, in order to subdue or exclude the peoples that lived to the north and west – the Celtic inhabitants of what are now Scotland, Wales and Ireland. In AD 122, the emperor Hadrian visited Britain and decided to mark the northern limit of the empire by building his famous wall, which stretched from the Irish Sea to the North Sea and was studded with forts along its seventy-three-mile length (colour picture 2). According to Hadrian's contemporary biographer, its purpose was 'to separate the Romans from the barbarians'.

The Ruin of Britain

At its maximum in the second century, the number of soldiers stationed in this extensive frontier zone was massive – something like 50,000 men, over ten per cent of the entire imperial army. In the following century these numbers were drastically reduced, falling to around a third of their peak before AD 300. This reduction in military expenditure had knock-on economic effects for Britain as a whole. Across the province towns shrank in size, and their public buildings and monuments fell into disrepair and decay. London in particular was badly hit – its population plummeted and many of its buildings were dismantled.⁷

Meanwhile, by the middle of the third century, a new threat had emerged, as raiders from across the sea began attacking and plundering the southern and eastern coasts. They came from Germania, which was the catch-all Roman term for the region of Europe that lay outside the empire, north of the River Rhine and the River Danube, and west of the River Vistula. The particular German people that were raiding Britain were known as Saxons.

But in spite of these cutbacks and menaces, peace in Britain was preserved. Though army numbers had been slashed, there was heavy investment in physical defences. Greater sums than ever before were spent on town walls, and a string of new fortresses was constructed along the southern and eastern coasts. At Richborough in Kent, for example, the bustling port that had grown up since the Roman invasion presumably came under Saxon attack, for in the mid-third century its size was drastically reduced, and its central area was ringed with triple lines of ditches that cut unsparingly through shops and warehouses. By the end of the century the whole town had been transformed into a formidable fortress, with stone walls twenty-six feet high and over ten feet thick. Similar structures were built elsewhere at places like Portchester, Pevensey and Caister-on-Sea, and were collectively known as the forts of the Saxon Shore. Meanwhile, life in the towns and cities went on in some style. New villas were built, and former industrial zones were transformed into gardens and orchards. In the countryside, some of grandest villas yet were constructed in the early fourth century.⁸



3. The changing appearance of Roman Richborough. A prosperous port around AD 120 (a), reduced to a small fort in the mid-third century by the addition of ditches (b), and finally enlarged and walled in the late third century (c).

As we move further into the fourth century, however, the situation starts to seem less sanguine. We begin to hear about a warlike people in the north of Britain called the Picts, and as the decades progress we can discern a growing anxiety about their attacks. The defences of Hadrian's Wall were repeatedly rebuilt, and in 343 the emperor Constantine personally led an expeditionary force against the Pictish menace. By the 360s there were also invaders crossing the sea from Ireland – the Scots and the Attacots. The crisis became so acute by 367 that it provoked a widespread mutiny among the army, requiring another military expedition from the Continent to restore order.⁹

Modern historians are divided about this restoration. Some see it as a success, returning Britain to the sort of prosperity it had previously enjoyed, with continued investment in grandiose villas and civic defences. Others, however, are less convinced, and see the events of 367–8 as a blow from which the province never truly recovered. An analysis of all the known Roman sites in Britain, counting the number of rooms occupied from one generation to the next, suggests that the country had been in decline since the early fourth century. By 375 the occupancy of villas had fallen by a third, and in towns it had fallen by a half. Such figures suggest that the property-owning classes had indeed been hit hard by repeated barbarian incursions.¹⁰ But what really sealed Britain's fate were similar attacks on the other side of the empire.

The Roman Empire was famously vast, stretching from the Atlantic in the west to Arabia in the east, and encompassing all the lands that surrounded the Mediterranean – the 'Middle of the World' sea. So vast, indeed, that it eventually proved impossible to administer from a single centre, and in AD 286 it was split in two: a western half comprising Italy, Spain, Gaul and Britain, and an eastern half that included the Balkans, Greece, Palestine and Egypt. From that point onwards, apart from a couple of exceptional periods, there were always two emperors, ruling two separate empires, with two separate armies.

There is no single agreed explanation of what caused this colossal political system to unravel, but one factor generally accepted as a catalyst was the appearance of the Huns. A nomadic people who originated on the wide grasslands of central Asia, the Huns were, in the words of a contemporary Roman writer, a ‘wild race, moving without encumbrances, and consumed by a savage passion to pillage the property of others’. By 376 those others included the Goths, a more settled people who lived on the frontier of the eastern empire. That year, because of Hunnish attacks, many thousands of Goths sought and received permission to cross the Danube and settle in imperial territory. But relations between the refugees and their Roman hosts soon soured, leading to rebellion and eventually a full-scale battle at Adrianople (now Edirne in modern Turkey). It was a colossal disaster for Rome: two-thirds of the army of the eastern empire – perhaps 10,000 men – were wiped out, and the eastern emperor, Valens, was among those killed.¹¹

The catastrophe in the east had immediate consequences for the west. Probably some western troops were sent eastward to compensate for the losses at Adrianople, but more consequential still was the decision to relocate the western capital. For the previous century, the western empire had been governed from the city of Trier, now in Germany, then in the Roman province of Gaul. But in 381 the emperor Gratian, probably because of the ongoing crisis in the Balkans, abandoned Trier for Italy, and removed his court to Milan. This was bad news for Gaul, because the presence of the emperor was a source of patronage for the local elite, and an important prop to the regional economy.¹²

It was also bad news for Britain, for the island was equally enmeshed in the empire’s political and economic systems. Several Roman writers noted that grain was shipped from Britain to feed imperial troops on the Rhine, and we can therefore reasonably assume that other British commodities were also being exported to Trier. When the court was removed, therefore, it is likely that Britain was hit hard. Just two years later, in 383, the army in Britain revolted, and proclaimed its leader, Magnus

Maximus, as the new emperor of the west. He promptly invaded Gaul, defeated and killed Gratian, and restored the imperial court to Trier.¹³

This attempt to reverse the direction of travel, however, was short-lived. Five years later Maximus was himself defeated and killed in battle by the new eastern emperor, Theodosius, and the western court was once again removed to Italy. The blow to Britain was compounded by the fact that, in order to effect his usurpation, Maximus had removed troops from the province, and they had either perished with him, or else stayed on the European mainland. A contemporary survey known as the *Notitia Dignitatum* (List of Dignities) suggests that by the 390s soldiers who had earlier been stationed in north Wales at Caernarfon were serving in the Balkans, while the legion formerly at Caerleon in south Wales had been relocated to Richborough, a fort less than a tenth of the size of their previous barracks. Archaeological evidence at such sites also suggests the military presence in Britain was rapidly diminishing.¹⁴

Meanwhile, in the heartlands of the empire, the crises continued to mount. Theodosius, who had ruled both east and west since 392, died three years later, dividing the empire between his two sons. Both were young and inexperienced. Arcadius, who ruled in the east, was seventeen years old; Honorius, who succeeded to the west, only ten. Feuding and civil war between competing factions followed, while the barbarian menace continued to increase: in 401 and 402 Italy itself was invaded by the Goths.¹⁵

These tumultuous events must have had an impact on Britain, but precisely what that impact was we cannot say. What we do know is that 402 is the last year in which Roman coins appear in Britain's archaeological record in any significant quantities. The minting of coins in London had ceased after the death of Magnus Maximus in 388, and since then the province had been reliant on new supplies from the mainland, principally from Milan. But in 402 Milan was deemed to be too close to the fighting on the other side of the Alps, and production was moved

to Ravenna. After this relocation, the bulk import of coin to Britain suddenly ceased.¹⁶

This was probably the final straw for the army in Britain: nothing is likelier to have created discontent among the soldiery than not being paid. Of course, there would still have been an existing currency in circulation, but without regular transfusions from the Continent it cannot have been enough. The British authorities evidently tried their best to cope. The vast majority of coins recovered from late Roman Britain show signs of 'clipping' – that is, of having had some amount of silver sheared from their edges. In the case of the Hoxne Hoard, 98.5 per cent of its 14,500 silver coins had been mutilated in this way, some of them losing almost a third of their original weight. This is likely to have been an official attempt to make the existing currency go further: after 402 we find coins struck in Britain that are imitations of genuine imperial issues, suggesting that at least some of the silver clipped from older coins was being recycled to make new ones. The Hoxne treasure contains 428 such copies, and all of these copies had themselves been clipped.¹⁷



4. Three coins from the Hoxne Hoard, showing the reduction in size due to clipping.

Thus by the start of the fifth century the people of Britain were being paid in coin which was visibly shrinking from one year to the next, and presumably in many cases not being paid

at all. By 406, the army had clearly had enough. In the summer of that year, they rose in rebellion, proclaiming a man named Marcus as their new emperor. By the autumn he had been deposed in favour of a certain Gratian, who was in turn murdered after only four months and replaced by an ordinary soldier called Constantine. This rapid turnover of leaders suggests that the issue went beyond personalities, and that a struggle was taking place between rival factions in pursuit of different policies, particularly Britain's relationship with the rest of the empire. These debates acquired added urgency after the end of 406, at which point a number of barbarian tribes – the Vandals, the Alans and the Sueves – crossed the Rhine frontier and invaded Gaul, reportedly causing alarm among the Britons that they might be next.

The replacement of Gratian with Constantine, which happened soon after, suggests the triumph of those who believed the best form of defence was attack. Immediately after his elevation, the would-be usurper set out for Gaul, intent on deposing the sitting emperor. His name, we are told, gave people hope, presumably because it evoked the memory of Constantine the Great, who had been proclaimed emperor in Britain almost exactly a century earlier, and had gone on to reunite a divided empire. But the new Constantine, alas, did not measure up to his illustrious namesake. After some initial successes, he incurred the implacable enmity of his rival, Honorius, by executing some of his relatives, and was in turn captured and beheaded by loyalist imperial forces.

What proved to be a personal disaster for Constantine was an even greater calamity for the country he had left behind. In pursuit of victory on the mainland he must have taken with him many of the troops stationed in Britain, further reducing its already depleted defences. If any voices had cautioned against his all-or-nothing strategy, they were soon proved right. Soon after his departure, probably in 408, the province was devastated by an invasion of Saxons.¹⁸

Now it was the turn of the rest of the population to rise in rebellion. According to the Greek historian Zosimus, writing in the early sixth century, the barbarian attacks drove the Britons

‘to revolt from Roman rule and live on their own, no longer obedient to Roman laws’. It was an extraordinary step prompted by the dire condition to which events of recent decades had reduced them. The whole point of the Roman state was to guarantee peace for its citizens with a well-trained army. If that army was absent, or so inadequate that it could not prevent the violent incursions of seaborne raiders, what was the point of paying taxes, or obeying a law that forbade civilians from carrying weapons? Self-defence was synonymous with self-rule. The Britons, says Zosimus, ‘armed themselves, and ran many risks to ensure their own safety, and freed their cities from attacking barbarians ... expelling the Roman magistrates and establishing the government they wanted’.¹⁹

This makes the revolt of 409 sound like a great success – plucky little Britannia throwing off Roman rule and beating the barbarians into the bargain. In fact, this was the event that tipped the province over the precipice. Once its economic and political links with the empire were severed, Britain went into free fall. The archaeological record, previously so abundant, becomes almost undetectably thin. Good quality pottery vanishes, as do everyday items of ironmongery such as nails. Their sudden disappearance indicates not only that these industries had failed soon after 410, but that within a generation the villas and towns of Roman Britain had been almost completely abandoned. The implication of this data is unavoidable: society had collapsed. It was, in the words of one modern historian, ‘probably the most dramatic period of social and economic collapse in British history’.²⁰

The further implications of this are appalling. The abandonment of towns and villas means huge numbers of people must have been on the move in search of shelter and food. The failure of normal trade and distribution networks indicates that food would have been in short supply. The absence of an army would have led to the rise of looting, pillaging and robbery. The rich could use their existing wealth to hire armed protection, but were evidently unable to remain in their luxurious but unfortified residences. Everyone else would have had to fend for themselves.

One way or another, as happens when modern states fail and civil society dissolves, people must have perished in huge numbers, through famine, disease and violence.²¹

This was the period in which the Hoxne treasure was hidden. The very latest coins in the hoard, only eight in number, bear the face of Constantine, the British usurper proclaimed in 407, and were minted before the death of his eastern counterpart, Arcadius, in 408. The fact that all eight were clipped and showed other signs of wear suggests they must have circulated for some time after their issue, meaning that the hoard might have been buried a decade or two later. During these decades there were no longer occasions for dining with ornate silver salt cellars or donning gem-studded jewellery, and an ever-increasing likelihood that such items would be stolen or seized by violence. Hence, presumably, the decision to secrete them in the ground.²²

The hope must have been that the bad times would eventually end, and that Roman rule would be restored, as it always had been in the past.

Nothing is more likely than that, during these years, Britain also continued to suffer from repeated barbarian raids. Hard proof is lacking, because raiders, unlike settlers, leave little behind in the way of archaeological evidence, and where the record does reveal towns and villas destroyed by fire, the tendency of late has been to assume the causes were accidental rather than deliberate. But, given the lack of soldiers to man the coastal forts, and the breakdown in co-ordination and communication, barbarians who had been trying their luck in Britain for decades were now presented with a much softer target. The social chaos unleashed in the wake of the revolt, the hordes of displaced and vulnerable people, made the former province a perfect hunting ground for invaders in search of treasure, cattle or slaves. Later tradition has led to the assumption that the worst threat was posed by the Picts and Scots, and doubtless this was true the further one travelled north. But in southern and eastern Britain the primary menace was the Saxons.

Although there are no contemporary descriptions from Britain, Saxon raiders are described in a few sources from across the Channel in fifth-century Gaul. In 455, for example, a Gallo-Roman aristocrat and poet named Sidonius Apollinarius made a passing mention of 'the Saxon pirate, who deems it sport to furrow in British waters with hides, cleaving the blue sea in a stitched boat'.²³ Some years later, the same writer provided a fuller picture in a letter to a friend who was responsible for repelling raids along the Atlantic coast. 'The Saxon', he wrote, 'is the most ferocious of all foes. He comes upon you without warning; when you expect his attack he slips away. Resistance only moves him to contempt; a rash opponent is soon down ... Shipwrecks to him are no terror, but only so much training. His is no mere acquaintance with the perils of the sea; he knows them as he knows himself.'²⁴

It was not only the Saxon's ferocity and fearlessness that perturbed his opponents, but his paganism. The Romans had once worshipped a pantheon of different gods, but in the course of the fourth century they had abandoned them for Christianity. During the reign of Constantine the Great (306–37) the persecution of Christians had ceased and their creed had become the official religion of the empire. In every province new churches had sprung up, and a new hierarchy of priests, headed by bishops. Sidonius, who had begun his career as a diplomat, eventually became bishop of Clermont-Ferrand.²⁵ He was consequently appalled by the heathenism of the Saxon pirates who, like most of the peoples beyond the empire's northern frontier, had not experienced conversion and clung stubbornly to their pagan beliefs.

'When the Saxons are setting sail from the Continent,' he explained, 'it is their practice, thus homeward bound, to abandon every tenth captive to a watery end.' This custom, he continued, was all the more deplorable because it was prompted by sincere belief. 'These men are bound by vows which have to be paid in victims; they conceive it as a religious act to perpetrate this horrible slaughter, and to take anguish from the prisoner in place of ransom.'²⁶

Pagan pirates such as these must have been attacking Britain in the early fifth century, ravaging far inland, profiting from and contributing to society's collapse. In 429, another Gallo-Roman bishop, Germanus of Auxerre, was asked to cross the Channel to combat an outbreak of a heresy, and ended up helping a besieged community of Britons against a horde of Picts and Saxons – a struggle he won by baptising the defenders and commanding them to chant the Alleluia as a battle cry. This story comes from a life of Germanus written half a century later to establish his sanctity, and is therefore unlikely to be true in every respect, but it establishes two important fundamentals. First, that there were still some people in Britain in 429 trying to uphold public authority, sufficiently anxious about the spread of heresy to send for overseas help. Second, that these British authorities were engaged in an existential struggle against barbarian invaders, and – notwithstanding Germanus' stalwart assistance – they were finding it increasingly difficult to cope. In the words of the bishop's later biographer, they were 'utterly unequal to the contest'.²⁷

This brings us to the most well-known part of the story. It is well known because it was told by the Venerable Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is without question the single most important and influential work of the whole Anglo-Saxon period. According to Bede, the Britons, 'ignorant of the practice of warfare', were reduced to such a wretched state by Pictish and Scottish attacks that they held a council, in which they decided to employ foreigners to fight on their behalf. At the invitation of their king, Vortigern, a force of Saxon warriors came to Britain in three ships and was granted a place to settle in the eastern part of the island. In the first instance these mercenaries acquitted themselves well, winning a victory against the Britons' northern enemies.

But, as Bede goes on to explain, the Saxons secretly intended to conquer the whole country for themselves. After their initial success they sent word back to their homelands that Britain was fertile and the Britons were cowards. Very soon a much larger fleet of Saxons arrived and joined together with the original

cohort to form an invincible army. It was not long before the inevitable denouement. The Saxons suddenly made peace with the northern peoples they were supposed to be fighting and turned their weapons against their British hosts, demanding greater rewards for their service, and threatening to devastate the whole island if their demands were not met. When no more supplies were forthcoming, the Saxons burned and ravaged Britain from sea to sea. 'Public and private buildings fell into ruins,' says Bede, 'priests were everywhere slain at the altars, prelates and people alike perished by sword and fire regardless of rank, and there was no one left to bury those who had died a cruel death.'²⁸

Famous as it is, Bede's story cannot be taken at face value. The main problem is that as a source it is very late: Bede was writing in the early eighth century, a full 300 years after the events he purports to describe, and during that time the tale of the coming of the Saxons had taken a legendary turn. The assertion, for example, that the initial force arrived in three ships, aside from being inherently improbable, is a common trope found in the origin stories of other northern European peoples. Similarly, the mention of a British leader called 'Vortigern' is suspect, because the name itself meant something like 'High Ruler' in Brittonic. Bede also named the leaders of the Saxons as a Hengist and Horsa, and says they were brothers. This was apparently a local tradition from Kent, and is even less likely to have any basis in historical reality: their names translate as 'gelding' and 'horse', and brothers with alliterative names are another frequent feature of European foundation myths. Hengist and Horsa are no more likely to have existed than Romulus and Remus.²⁹

But while bits of Bede's account are clearly folklore, his main source was a written one. The story of the arrival of the Saxons was originally committed to parchment by a British author called Gildas, who wrote a tract known to posterity as *The Ruin of Britain*. It is an extremely problematic text, not least because we know almost nothing about Gildas himself. Historians have spilled vast amounts of ink arguing about his possible dates on the basis of a few debatable words in his work. On balance, it

seems likeliest that he lived in the early sixth century, and probably wrote his famous tract at some point in its second quarter.³⁰

The main problem with *The Ruin of Britain* is that it is not really a work of history – it is an open letter addressed to the British rulers of the author's own day, criticizing them for their manifold failings and sins, and exhorting them to mend their wicked ways. Gildas *does* include a historical introduction to explain how the society of his own day had come to be in such a sorry state, but he was hampered by a lack of reliable sources. As he explained at the outset, earlier books about Britain's history had either been burned by barbarian raiders or carried off into exile, forcing him to rely on the works of foreign writers that gave him only a very incomplete picture. Accordingly, he provides no dates whatsoever, and commits some howling errors. To take one egregious example, he asserts that Hadrian's Wall was built in the context of Pictish attacks in the early fifth century, misdating its actual construction by almost 300 years.³¹

And yet, when all these caveats have been lodged, *The Ruin of Britain* remains the most valuable account of the island's fifth-century history, and the only one that can be regarded as even remotely contemporary. The main event – the ultimate cause, according to Gildas, of all Britain's subsequent misery – was the arrival of the Saxons. His story is more or less identical to its later reiteration by Bede: the Britons, plagued by Pictish and Scottish attacks, convened a council, and decided to employ a force of Saxons as mercenaries. These warriors initially arrived in three ships and settled on the east side of Britain, but were soon joined by a second and larger contingent. Gildas, unlike Bede, makes no mention of the Saxons engaging the Scots and Picts – in his account they simply become ever more demanding and aggressive towards their British hosts, before finally revolting and ravaging the whole country, an event that Gildas describes in the same apocalyptic terms that Bede later borrowed.³²

Is this story credible? Gildas lived much closer in time to these alleged events than Bede, but he was still writing almost a century after they took place, and his mention of the Saxons arriving in

three ships suggests that the story had already been infected by legend. Moreover, is it really plausible that the Britons would have sought to employ Saxons as mercenaries, given the evidence, both direct and circumstantial, that the Saxons themselves had been raiding and plundering Britain for decades with the same fury as the Scots and Picts? Gildas evidently thought not, for he makes no mention of Saxon attacks prior to this episode. In his account, the Saxons appear only after the Britons made the fateful decision to invite them – a decision that Gildas furiously condemned as the height of folly.³³

Perhaps surprisingly, the answer to these questions is yes: it is perfectly reasonable to believe that the Britons would have decided to employ barbarians to fight on their behalf, because this was a long-established Roman practice. Throughout the fourth century such warriors had been routinely recruited into imperial armies, some of them rising to the highest rank. Flavius Stilicho, for example, the most senior general in the western empire, and its effective ruler during the minority of Honorius, was of Vandal descent. It was a practice that worked well while recruits were integrated into the regular army and effectively Romanized. What worked altogether less well was a new policy, introduced towards the end of the fourth century, which saw entire barbarian armies hired under the command of their own leaders. These ‘federate’ troops often proved much less dependable, and were liable to switch sides suddenly with disastrous consequences. But by that time matters were becoming desperate, and such desperate experiments could be contemplated.³⁴

Such was the situation in which the Britons eventually found themselves in the wake of their break with Rome. The country was in chaos and under constant assault from Picts, Scots and Saxons. The legions were long gone, and a civilian population, previously forbidden from carrying weapons, could not learn the arts of war overnight. In these circumstances, it becomes easy to understand how those in authority might seek to remedy the problem by recruiting one group of barbarians to fight against the others.

When did these events take place? Bede, who was much more concerned with chronology than Gildas, placed them during the rule of the emperor Marcian, whose accession he dated to 449, and eventually that date was adopted (and indeed celebrated) by later writers as the official year of the Saxons' arrival. But Bede was misled by a mistake in his principal source, *The Ruin of Britain* – a paraphrase of a letter that was almost certainly written *after* the Saxon revolt, but which Gildas had carelessly placed in his story at a point *before* the Saxons had even arrived. Bede, who was able to adduce from the letter's contents that it could not have been written before 446, was thus led to believe the Saxons must have arrived in Britain after that date.³⁵

In fact, other evidence, unavailable to Bede, indicates that he was about twenty years out, and that the first arrivals had taken place a generation earlier, around the year 430. It is around that date that we find the earliest archaeological indications of Saxon settlement: burials, artefacts and buildings of a kind that were utterly unfamiliar in late Roman Britain, but entirely commonplace in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia. We also have another written source besides Gildas. *The Gallic Chronicle of 452*, as its prosaic modern title implies, is a set of annals composed in Gaul in the mid-fifth century. It says nothing about the coming of the Saxons, but it suggests that their revolt took place around 441. Its entry for that year says 'The Britains [*sic*], up to now afflicted by various disasters and vicissitudes, were widely reduced to the rule of the Saxons.'³⁶

Naturally, one wishes that this anonymous writer, composing his chronicle only a decade later, could have been a little more garrulous. What, for example, did he mean by 'widely' (Latin: *late*)? The most we can conclude is that he knew the Saxons had seized control of a substantial area of Britain, but evidently not all of it. This accords with Gildas' description of what happened to the Britons after the Saxon revolt. Gildas, as a prophet chiding his people, emphasized the catastrophic consequences. Some of them were caught and killed, he says, and some surrendered and were enslaved, while others fled into foreign

exile or hid in the hills and forests. But Gildas then goes on to describe what was clearly a significant and celebrated British fightback. After a time, he says, the Saxons went home – presumably meaning their original settlements in Britain, rather than their homelands on the Continent – and God gave strength to the Britons. Gildas names their leader as Ambrosius Aurelianus, who he indicates was a Roman of high birth. Under this man's direction, we are told, the British people regained their confidence and defeated the Saxons in battle. After the Saxon revolt, therefore, Britain was evidently divided, with the newcomers in control of some areas and the pre-existing population in control of others.³⁷

How it was divided is worth investigating in more detail. Gildas portrays the split as the result of a straightforward binary struggle, and historians have tended to picture it that way ever since: Saxons in the east, Britons in the west, with only bloody battles if ever the twain should meet. To be fair to Gildas, this was probably how it seemed from his perspective in western Britain in the early sixth century. But there are several indications that, in the immediate wake of the Saxon revolt, and for much of the rest of the fifth century, the situation was rather more complicated.

As we already noted, from around 430 we start to find archaeological evidence in Britain of new settlers from the Continent. Cremation of the dead is the most obvious and clear-cut example. It had not been practised by the Britons since the third century, but was typical among the Saxons. The custom was to burn the body of the deceased on a funeral pyre, sometimes along with the bodies of animals, and then bury the ashes in an urn. In the Saxon homelands – the region between the rivers Elbe and Weser in north Germany – we find very large cremation cemeteries with thousands of urns dating back several centuries before 430. After that date, we begin to find them in Britain too. One of the largest and most thoroughly excavated is that at Spong Hill in Norfolk.³⁸

The other new practice that suddenly reveals itself around this time is the inclusion of grave goods – personal items such as

jewellery, combs or weapons that belonged to the deceased in life and were buried with them after death. Sometimes they are found in cremation cemeteries, buried along with the ashes in the urns, but other times they are included with non-cremated individuals who had simply been buried in the ground – a custom which archaeologists refer to as ‘furnished inhumation’. This too had been practised in Saxony, but had been introduced there only a few decades earlier, around the year 400. Its appearance in Britain a generation or so later was clearly connected to the coming of the Saxons, and many of the grave goods contained in such burials have close parallels with items found in their homelands.

Both these two new funerary practices are found in eastern Britain from the second quarter of the fifth century, and their distribution seems to reveal a significant regional split. Cremation cemeteries are almost exclusively concentrated in the northern part of this zone – the areas defined by rivers that flow into the Wash or the Humber (Figure 1.1). Furnished inhumations, by contrast, are found everywhere, but some of the items found within them reveal a similar division. To the north we find brooches and other metalwork decorated in a distinctive manner (dubbed the ‘Saxon Relief Style’ by art historians) which was clearly imported from the Saxon homelands. To the south, meanwhile, in an area defined by the River Thames, we find metal items worked in a different fashion – the so-called ‘Quoit Brooch Style’ – which appear to be Romano-British in origin (Figure 1.2).

What the archaeological evidence seems to reveal, therefore, is not a simple two-way split between Saxons and Britons, but a situation that was more complex, with the east divided into two quite distinct zones. In the more northerly zone there was a burial and artistic culture that clearly advertised a continued attachment to the Saxon homelands. In the southern zone, however, the situation seems more ambiguous. Some of the grave goods found in this region are Saxon, but others proclaim continuity with the imperial past. The occupants of these graves may have been continental newcomers, but in some cases they look



Figure 1.1
Cremation cemeteries

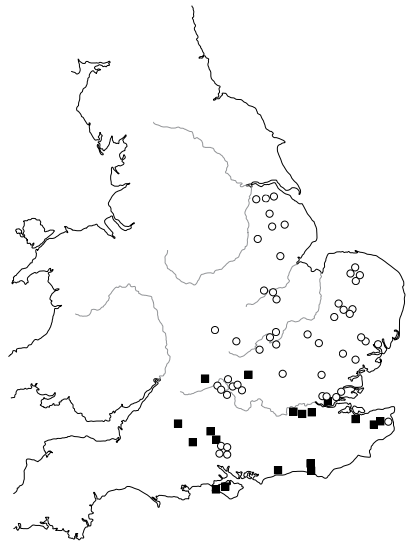


Figure 1.2
○ Saxon Relief Style v. ■ Quoit Brooch Style



Figure 1.3
Roman provinces, with capitals and
conjectured boundaries



Figure 1.4
Anglian wrist-clasps

like Romano-British people who had simply adopted a new and more demonstrative form of burial.³⁹

Could these apparent cultural divisions reflect political ones? This is altogether more speculative, but there is one intriguing possibility. Late Roman Britain had been divided into four (possibly five) provinces, each with its own governor and capital city. The locations of the capitals are known to have been London, Lincoln, Cirencester and York. The boundaries between the provinces are a matter of conjecture, but some historians have been inclined to draw the line between the London and Lincoln provinces in much the same position as the cultural watershed apparent in the archaeology of the mid-fifth century (Figure 1.3).⁴⁰

Highly speculative as it is, therefore, it could be that these provinces continued to have some sort of function after Britain's break with Rome.⁴¹ Perhaps their governors even came together in a council, as Gildas says, and agreed to hire Saxon mercenaries, who were then settled in various locations in the east, and ended up ruling some part of the island for themselves. On the basis of the archaeological evidence, we would probably locate that area as the zone in eastern England where the evidence of Saxon culture is strongest – the province governed from Lincoln. The London province must also have received significant numbers of new settlers, but here the evidence for a wholesale Saxon takeover is not so readily apparent. In this region, at least some people of Romano-British ancestry remained in positions of social significance. They were content to adopt a new way of being buried that advertised that significance, and wore dress fittings that announced their connections with the empire. Perhaps they still hoped that one day the empire would return.

This reading of the archaeological record leads us to the vexed but crucial question about the scale of Saxon immigration. Traditionally it was assumed that, wherever the newcomers settled in Britain, they simply replaced the indigenous peoples who had been living there before. Gildas, as we've seen, portrays the Britons

as being either killed or enslaved, or else fleeing into exile, and this was the majority view well into the twentieth century. It was reinforced by archaeology: how else could the abundant quantity of Saxon material, and almost total absence of Romano-British finds, be explained? The Saxons, it was widely held, must have migrated to Britain in vast numbers, occupying a landscape that had already been almost emptied by warfare, famine and social collapse, and expelling or exterminating any remaining Britons with the edges of their swords.⁴²

Beginning in the 1960s, this view was subjected to a thoroughgoing re-evaluation. Doubts were expressed in general about the scale of barbarian migrations in fourth- and fifth-century Europe, and it was argued that the numbers involved must have been much smaller than those given by contemporary writers. For Britain, in particular, historians pointed to the difficulty of transporting large numbers of people across the sea with the rudimentary ships available at the time. Instead of a mass migration, scholars developed the idea that Britain was invaded by only a few Saxons who were disproportionately powerful. The Britons were not massacred or expelled en masse by this minority but remained in place, and eventually adopted the language, religion and culture of the newcomers. Historians call this an 'elite transfer' model. Such a model, of course, serves to confound the traditional interpretation of the archaeology, for it raises the possibility that people found buried with Saxon grave goods might not be migrants at all, or even the descendants of migrants, but Britons who have embraced Saxon culture.⁴³

Latterly the pendulum has swung back in the other direction, and the scale of migration is now once again generally reckoned to have been very sizeable. This revisionism has little to do with DNA. The scientific analysis of bones, and especially teeth, from fifth- and sixth-century burials can sometimes indicate where their owners grew up, and in some cases we find people buried in Britain who had grown up in northern Germany. While this is helpful in individual cases, however, it tells us nothing about the overall size of the population movement. The other approach,