

Summary 16: The Ruin of Britain

Around 540 AD a Celtic Christian monk called Gildas Bandonicus wrote some sermons which now constitute the earliest and only substantial account of the arrival of the Angles and Saxons in Britain. That we view these peoples as a conquering horde, albeit forefathers of the English nation and its language, is largely due to Gildas' scathing account of events. In particular, he blamed a local king, Vortigern, for inviting the invaders and thus creating "the ruin of Britain".

Gildas did not say that even before the Romans withdrew in 410 AD, Angle and Saxon mercenaries had been used by the *civitates* to defend themselves against raiders around what became known as the *Saxon shore* in the south-east. But it wasn't only invaders from abroad: the Picts from the North, the Scotti and Irish from the west also raided the territory and in 367, various Teutonic tribes from across the North Sea combined with the Picts and Scotti to launch a combined attack in the so-called Threefold Conspiracy. After the Romans left, many small British kingdoms were established during the 4th and 5th Centuries. The Saxons and Angles continued their settlement along the North Sea coast. It was at this time too that the Dal Riada, the Scotti from Ireland, began to move into Argyll on the west coast of Pictland. By AD 475-500 much of the country was in a state of flux. This is when the Arthurian legends began, the battles to preserve the Briton's heritage and the eventual retreat into the West country. In the south, the Jutes conquered Kent in 488 while Saxons claimed the south coast and the valley of the Thames. Then, in 496 or thereabouts the British defeated the invaders at the Battle of Mons Badonicus which, by the 9th Century was attributed to King Arthur. Although Northumbria initially played a dominant role, by the 8th Century, Mercia emerged as the dominant power with every kingdom south of the Humber paying it tribute. In short, the land of the Angle-Saxon Conquest was well on its way to becoming England.

Genetically, however, the picture is not as clear-cut as moving lines on a map. Surprising, in one sense, the majority of the English are not English but British. Although political power evolved to the Angle-Saxon (and Jutes) settlers, genetic evidence points to the majority of the indigenous people remaining where they had always been. Considering that they were in control of Britain for over 400 years, the Romans left an arguably small genetic footprint on British soil. What trace of their genes they did leave behind are most probably not so much Italian but more characteristic of the men in the legions, recruited from all corners of the Roman Empire and posted to Britain.

"Who are the English?" seems to be controversial at the moment — There is, for instance, a debate raging on several of the genetic genealogy web lists about a "hole" in the distribution of Haplogroup Eb3 in England, one of the haplogroups probably brought to England in greatest numbers by Roman legions.

Who was here when the Romans came?: Oppenheimer suggests that the history of pre-Roman coins in southern Britain reveals an influence from Belgic Gaul. The tribes of England south of the Thames and along the south coast during Caesar's time all had Belgic names or affiliations and a Germanic-type language could already have been indigenous to England at the time of the Roman invasion. Oppenheimer also argues that much of the genetic legacy in England dates from Neolithic times and not only from the Dark Ages and their so-called invasions. For example, it is argued that when Doggerland sank, refugees from those submerging North Sea plains were divided, some going to England, some the Friesia on the continental mainland. This

would explain the presence in England of genetic characteristics impossible to differentiate from those in modern Friesland. He concludes that the dark-ages invasions of England and northeastern Britain as less like replacements than minority elite additions, akin to earlier and larger Neolithic intrusions from the same places.

The Norse Vikings: Because we often confuse the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who were Vikings who came mostly to England, with others who came from further up the Norwegian coast, it is useful to refer to the northerners as "Norse Vikings" or simply "Norse". They came, first as raiding parties but later to colonise Scotland and parts of Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Orkney and Shetland Islands. Genetically, the y-chromosomal lineages of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes are found today most commonly from Northumberland and Durham to Kent and Sussex. The different genetic signature of the Norse is found mostly in Shetland, Orkney and other islands including Man, parts of Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

Vikings from various sources had been raiding Scotland and its islands ever since the sack of Lindisfarne in 793 AD. Isolated monastic settlements where Scottish kings liked to store their treasures were of course, attractive destinations for Viking raiding parties. In 893 AD, the Danes mounted a major offensive in Scotland in which the Pictish nobility was virtually wiped out. The Danish hero, Halfdan broke away from the Danish Army to lead attacks on eastern Scotland while other Vikings based in the Orkneys raided the coast of the Moray Firth. In 900 AD a fortress south of Aberdeen, Dunottar, had fallen to the raiders while the west coastal settlements were under constant and bloody attack by mixed bands of Celt and Viking marauders. The situation was finally taken in hand by King Constantine mac Aed (900-943 AD) who, through every weapon at his disposal, including making war, diplomacy and even marriage exchange, succeeded in beating back the attack from the Vikings from the sea and from the Anglo-Saxon invaders from the Danelaw and Northumbria to the south.

But the Norse Vikings not only raided — eventually they settled. Remembered historically as savage warriors, most of the Norse Vikings who settled in Scotland were an overwhelmingly rural people who came there to find new land to farm as had been their way for centuries in Norway. The densest settlements were in Caithness and in the off-shore islands to the north. Two settlements were of great importance, those on Orkney and on Shetland.

Orkney: Since 1472, the Orkney Islands have belonged to Scotland but were originally annexed by Norway in 875 AD. It is said that a band of Norse landed in Orkney and killed all the Pictish indigenes. The Norse earldom in Orkney was effectively a kingdom which reached its zenith during the rule of Þórfinnr Sigurðarson from 1024 until 1064. He extended his domains onto mainland Scotland and throughout the Western Isles. As a young man he would have fought many of his battles against the Scottish High King, Macbeth.

Shetland: Until the 12th Century, the islands were part of the Earldom of Orkney. The Norse used them as a staging post *en route* to Greenland and began settling from the 8th Century. In the 14th Century contacts with Scotland began. In 1469 Christian I of Norway mortgaged Shetland to Scotland in order to pay his daughter's dowry when Margaret married James III of Scotland. From then on, large numbers of Scots began to settle there.

Genetically, the Scandinavians have left their mark in these islands : one study found that approximately 44% for Shetland inhabitants and approximately 30% of those from Orkney had Scandinavian genetic signatures, with approximately equal contributions from Scandinavian males and females in both cases. Other studies show that Anglo-Saxon and Danish Vikings made no contribution to the gene pool of these islands.